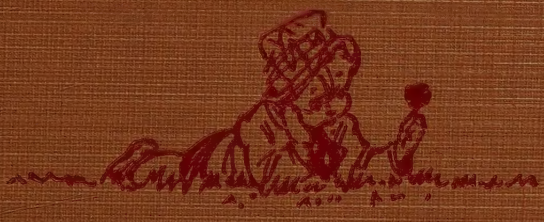
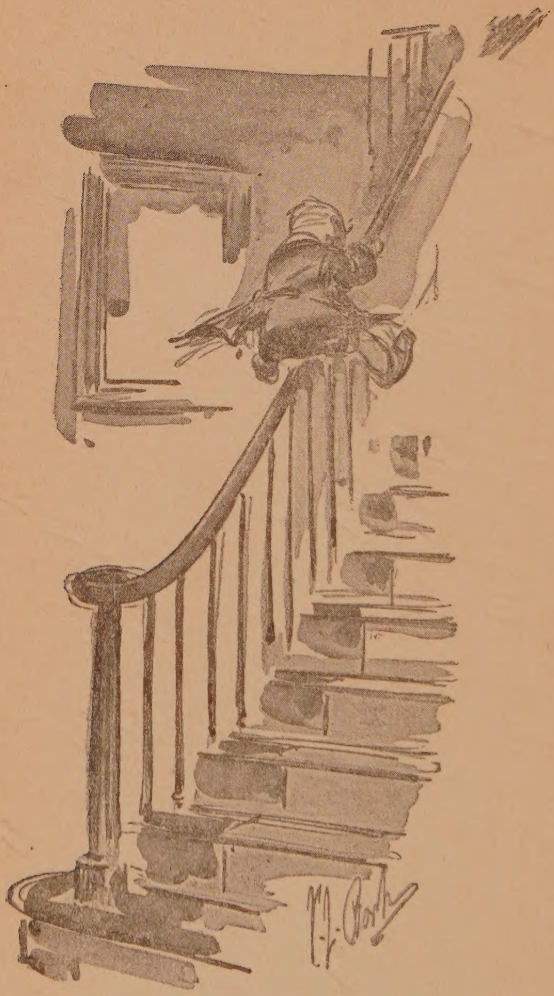
SKIPPY



Percy Crosby



"'Comin'!' answered Skippy, sliding down the banisters."

"He stared at the dingy light in her window."

SKIPPY

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SKIPPY

By

PERCY CROSBY

With Illustrations by the Author

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SKIPPY

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by
Percy Crosby

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CHAPTER I

"SKIPPY, up—nine o'clock."

"All right, Ma, just a minute. I'm . . ."

"What?"

"Yeah, I says."

"No 'Yeah' about it! I want you to get up. Come!"

"Aw, gee! Give a fellow a show. . . . I . . ." Skippy snuggled into the blankets as the parlor clock tinkled nine.

"How's that?" asked Mrs. Skinner.

"I says awl-right . . . just soon's I find that other shoe. . . ."

"Now."

"I am."

The mother waited at the foot of the stairs, but hearing no further noise from the bedroom she shouted, "Here, Towser, do you want these buckwheat cakes?"

"You leave them buckwheat cakes alone, ya darn mutt!"

"Well, I'm not going to keep them hot another minute."

Jumping from bed, Skippy swept up his clothes and dropped them over the banister; and, with a sigh of relief, Mrs. Skinner returned to the kitchen. In a jiffy he was at the dining room table. He lowered a chair between his legs and straddled the seat.

"I didn't hear you wash," the mother called from the kitchen.

"How can I wash? The bathroom's all set for company."

This answer had a soothing effect. "Wash your hands and face in here, then," and Mrs. Skinner moved a pan of dishes as Skippy entered in long ribbed underwear. "Did you sleep in your underwear?"

"I had to. Couldn't go to bed raw."

"I laid your pajamas on the foot of the bed."

"Jim Lovering goes to bed in his underwear," suggested Skippy, reaching for soap.

"Next time you wear pajamas."

"If you ever said 'pajamas' to Jim he'd think you was playin' Indians—regular guy, Jim."

"Hurry in and eat those cakes while they're hot!"

It was Saturday! Glorious Saturday! And in sheer joy Skippy walked to his plate of steaming cakes, imitating a bandy-legged man. "Oh! what could be

wonderfuller than this," and he poured molasses in galloping streams as he sang: "It's a beautiful day to—"

"Don't sing while eating."

"Be—" and hearing no response, he blurted, "Glad in!"

Skippy paused, and then took advantage of the silence to continue: "The vio-lets are budding today."

"What did I tell you?"

"Say, Ma, the choirmaster says if I don't bust out laughing I can sing a solo. I'm goin' to sing 'Now the day is over, night is drawee-ing nigh-igh—' "

Skippy somehow managed to dress and finish his breakfast at the same time. He placed his hat on the end of his toe, and after a few preparatory jabs kicked it up in the air. Losing his balance, he stumbled against the table, upsetting a ketchup bottle and breaking a glass. As he was about to run, his mother's stare held him.

"Look at that hat!"

Skippy removed his hat from the butter and scraped it with a knife. When the blade, covered with a mixture of wool and butter, was about to glide on the edge of the butter plate, Mrs. Skinner wrenched it from his hand, and, grabbing the other, she led him into the kitchen.

"'A willful waste makes a woeful want'," Skippy pointed out.

Though Skippy's face glowed after a vigorous rubbing, he lingered and toyed with the folds of his mother's apron.

"If this house ever catched on fire, the first one I'd rush in an' save is you, Ma. I wouldn't care if the floors was sizzlin' like bacon. I'd save you—Yes, sir, save you. . . . Ma, can I have a dime?" Feeling the searching pause, and fearful that the subject dangled in vapor, Skippy hurriedly whittled: "Then a nickel?"

"No!"

This solution of the problem sent Skippy scampering to his room. For a few moments there was a tremendous sound of activity behind closed doors; then he burst out, bundled in odds and ends of military insignia. As he ran through the front door, he went sprawling off the porch, tripped by the sudden swerve of a cavalry sword that dangled from his belt. Rubbing off the bits of sod from his knees, he got up and notched the sword under his arm, and continued his journey to Marlowe's.

With sword waving, Skippy swooped through the Marlowes' orchard, scattering chickens and ducks in every direction.

"Ya Hoo! Morgan's raiders! Ya Hoo!"

The swinging scabbard sent him once more to the ground. Sitting up he arranged his attire and reflected. Was God in back of all this, just because he was a Confederate? Treason, maybe! He shuddered. What was treason anyway? Sometime he was going to look it up, because it smacked of insult. Still the little he knew of Morgan inspired him. Why was a man like that on the other side? Perhaps he thought he looked better in gray. Oh, well, if he wanted to be Morgan he would, and the country could make the best of it.

With this consoling thought he arose and approached the Marlowe home freckled with blending spots of purple and gold, cast by the tall elms and weeping willows swaying overhead. It was Colonial in architecture, but rambled off into extra wings of pantries, wash house and kitchen. A long porch stretched in front of the home, only a step from the ground. From this the boys often walked through the windows that were on the level with the flooring. It was the kind of a house George Washington must have slept in.

Skippy made his way to the porch and, shading his eyes, peeked through one of the glass panels that bracketed the door. For some time he studied the

grandfather's clock on the landing of a winding staircase, but an orange glow suffused the face of it. He listened as it tolled the hour, only to forget the number of strokes.

Ray Marlowe was almost the counterpart of Skippy. Both were ten, but Skippy's hands were opened for friends and knuckled for enemies. Ray only made friends.

Hearing Skippy's taps on the window he paused in his dunking. He waved a dripping bun in the direction of the kitchen door and motioned him to enter.

Then both dipped their buns with customary reverence until the sugar was scooped from the cup.

"What's the show goin' to be today, Skip?"

"Gettysburg."

"Why?"

"'Cause."

"'Cause! 'Cause why?"

"I just told you why—'cause."

"Gettysburg! Always Gettysburg! Week after week the same thing. No wonder we miss the peanut crackin', 'cause who wants to see the same show over and over?"

"What do you mean, over and over? I don't always sit in the same place, an' then sometimes I say the things standin' up."

"Yeh, but the crowd says it before you open your mouth, they know it so well; even Hopkins' parrot spills it all over the neighborhood."

"Ya mustn't forget they get a quartet throwed in with the show. Four guys for a cent, think of it! Who else could ever peddle that talent for a cent? Nobody."

"Yeh—'Tentin' tonight on the old camp ground' —the same song all the time. Every time they open their mouths, moths fly out," returned Ray.

"That's a very lovely song—it sorta gets way down in ya. The first time we sang that in school those whole notes made me think of soldiers' tears." And Skippy sang: "Wee-are tenting tonight on the old camp ground, give's a song to chee-er—"

"Mustn't sing at the table," warned Ray.

"There's no food on it."

"Sugar, ain't there?"

"Yeh, but brown lumps don't count. And, besides," said Skippy, "why should I come all the way down here to be took apart? Today it's Gettysburg. It was good enough for Grant, an' Lee, an' Abe Lincoln, weren't it?"

"Oh, them—sure!"

"Them? Them?" Skippy choked. "What's the matter with them?"

"I wasn't givin' ya outfit the coo-coo, Skip, I was just—"

"Suppose *they* went around blubberin': 'We don't want no more Gettysburg.' Huh? Supposin'!" challenged Skippy.

"But—"

"Why, everybody'd be out of a war—an' if they hadn't strung it out, the war might o' ended, an' everybody'd been left with a lot of cannon balls on their hands."

"Yeh, there's something in that," conceded Ray.

"Betcha life!"

"Still, we oughta have somethin' new."

"Oh, I got it! I got it!" cried Skippy, hopping up and down as he shouted: "BULL RUN!"

"Gee! How did ya ever think of that?"

"Ideas come to me like that!" and Skippy snapped his fingers.

"We oughta get Somerset Gohagen to tell everybody —let's see if he's here yet."

Running from the house Skippy and Ray met Somerset Gohagen, the property man of the show, just entering the orchard.

"Wait'll we tell ya!" yelled Skippy.

"A new show!" added Ray. "BULL RUN!"

CHAPTER II

MORRISVILLE was laid out in a lazy way. Roads wound in and out like a river flowing in channels of least resistance. They curved away from rocks and embankments; at one place, where a tree blocked the course, the road merely divided, leaving the tree as an island, and then swerved on through the town.

Stone walls, rambling with ivy, braided the line of trees that arched the main thoroughfares; here and there white picket fences intervened along the winding drives. The houses on either side were of white or rusty tan, and the most casual glance disclosed the fact that nothing had been built in the present generation. Lawns sloped from every home without interposing sidewalks. At a town meeting, sidewalks once had been suggested as a means for improving the community; but Jim Lovering had risen in stern opposition.

"You don't need sidewalks when you've got the kind of folks in town that are used to walking in the middle of the road. Yes, sir, an' anybody slinkin'

along the houses c'n soon be made to walk in the open."

Boys who had to mow the lawns, however, prayed for these suggested improvements continually. Sidewalks, they felt, would be a great help to the town.

Morrisville roughly stretched in the form of a letter "H." The crossing was the railroad, where stores, Town Hall and Fire Department met. In fact, if every lane and house were counted, the panorama of the village assumed the shape of an Old English "ℌ." At the beginning of the lower left sickle turn was the Marlowe home, overlooking Jim Lovering's place. From there the downward sweep went through a lane that ended at the Anderson farm, formerly the Hopkins Estate. The Hopkins family had been the first settlers of Morrisville; and perhaps a certain pride in their initial accounted for this formation.

Townspeople discussing the phenomenon, still referred to the famous remark of a village wit. "No, sir, they was no comicler critter than Went!" and the speaker would pause to light up. "He used to say this was one H of a town." Taking full credit for the laughter that followed, he would sit back sipping his pipe, contented with the world until the mirth began to flicker; then he would fan the flicker into a

roaring flame by drawling again; "Yes, sir, one H of a town."

"Well," Jim Lovering would answer dourly, "it may be an H of a town, but think o' what kind of a town it would be if Krausmeyer had anything to do with it. Him and his addin' habits would o' had us sprawled half across the country, an' then like as not he'd try to get away with a couple o' outlyin' initials."

Through this placid comumnity, peacefully engrossed in their Saturday morning chores, Somerset Gohagen burst like a rocket. He steamed out of the Marlowe orchard, zigzagging from house to house and shouting at the top of his lungs: "BULL RUN! BULL RUN!" Not that he had any more idea what the show was about than Skippy himself. For the moment he was not even concerned. He had easily won his place as the Official Parrot of Morrisville and his duties were clear.

"BULL RUN!" he bellowed again and again, "BULL RUN!"

Knockers clanked and white knobbed bells were pulled from their holdings as he sprinted up the street. To houses that stood back from the road he gave an extra yell, and clattered fences with a stick as he ran. Carpet beatings stopped, and late risers forgot their

burning toast as all rushed to the doors to catch the gist of Gohagen's screams.

He swerved toward Krausmeyer's, the grocer, while an ever-growing mob of children followed in his wake. Poking his head suddenly through the door, he announced: "BULL RUN!"

Krausmeyer dropped a scoop of sugar, and his spectacles skidded, clinking the left lens to tiny bits. A huge moustache sprayed from his face like the back of a watering cart.

"Gott! Such a loafer bizness," said the grocer.

Mrs. Barkenteen held a saucer full of coffee and paused in her blowing as the ding-a-ling bell over the door of the candy store tinkled. "BULL RUN!" yelled Gohagen, and closed the door with a slam that shook the glass. Mrs. Barkenteen scalded her hands with spilling coffee.

"BULL RUN! BULL RUN!"

A mad rush brought men to the streets, staring after the mob sweeping around the station. At the crossing, the flagman's shack was plastered with a gallery of skirty bathing girls and actresses, beaming in all their nicotine loveliness. The white-haired flagman lifted the stove lid and emptied a cheekful of tobacco—content with his own lingering boyishness. Hearing the thud of running feet he listened with lid

suspended; then reaching for a knotted cane, he hobbled out the door. With a howl that sent the old man up against the shack, Somerset made his brief announcement: "BULL RUN!"

By the time the flagman regained his wind, the excited mob had shot up the tracks. A small boy stopped for a brief second to tug at a falling garter, only to be left in the rear as the gang swung from the tracks and turned toward the school.

"BULL RUN! BULL RUN!" panted Somerset, "COME ONE-COME ALL!"

"BULL RUN! BULL RUN!" replied the faithful chorus.

Hammers stopped, and a carpenter upset a toolbox that tumbled from the second story of a building in the course of erection, as the whirling crowd swished past the school toward Marlowe's, with Gohagen still in the lead. Whizzing past Jim Lovering, who was out curry-combing his horse, the announcer put everything he had in one final ballyhoo: "BULL RUN!"

The horse shied and reared, and was only prevented from running wild by a quick movement of Jim's hand. He gripped the halter.

"I'll Bull Run you, you—"

But the crowd had already dipped into the hollow of the orchard before Jim could think of a sizzling

retort. As the audience swarmed to the entrance, Somerset sagged exhausted at the feet of his chief. Skippy glowered.

"Just what's been keeping ya?" he inquired.

Jostled by the crowd clamoring at the door, Skippy commanded, "Single file—Single file." The audience pushed and shoved into the barn, five abreast. Turning to Somerset, he added: "Bring around crowds like this all the week and we'll be able to get baseball uniforms for the whole team."

As a rule, Skippy looked upon pins as a contemptible means of gaining admission to a play; but only by the most drastic persuasion could he succeed in obtaining a penny. Occasionally he would entice an audience by a grab-bag, in which, after selling twenty tickets, someone would finally draw forth a penny peppermint stick right before the very eyes of the crowd. The winner of the second lottery would perhaps be rewarded with a tintype of Skippy's grandfather.

However, these methods were distasteful to Skippy, because they reflected upon his ability as an author and actor. He secretly felt that a play should draw the crowd on its own merit; therefore he usually had Somerset Gohagen beat a drum. This proved to be very successful, and during the excitement many un-

willing pennies would be dropped into the coffers of the box office. Occasionally the crowd attempted substitutions, but Skippy was ever alert for suspicious sounds.

Clink! and Skippy plucked a collar button from the cup. "Is this the only furniture ya got in your house?" he inquired.

"Well, I couldn't get a penny, 'cause me father's out o' work, an' besides we's lost the house," explained the other.

"How was that?"

"Oh, we owes an' owes, I guess, or somethin'; anyway we got to eat."

"Well, I'll close down before I fling me talent in the snoots of a collar-button audience." Skippy turned to Somerset. "I guess ya better get up 'cause no more's comin'."

As the audience filed past him, Skippy turned the pages of a sporting catalogue. He dreamed of the day when he could supply the team with uniforms with red stripes running down the sides of the pants; and he was forever in touch with these manufacturers, demanding cut rates and catalogues by return mail. As he thumbed the coveted pages, his eye denoted a departing figure.

"Hey, Collar Button, want to earn ya way?"

"Ya betcha."

"Well, carry up this drum."

Upstairs Skippy made his final inspection as stage manager. "Who took the door off'n the stage?" he inquired.

"We got to have somethin' to sit on."

"An' I should act Bull Run with a hole in the stage, huh?" demanded Skippy.

"There's lots of wood around for a new stage with two buildings going up," informed the sitter.

"That'd be stealin'!"

"No more stealin' than Krausmeyer coppin' me father's only lot," reminded Collar Button.

Meantime in a room back of the stage, Somerset Gohagen was preparing for the onslaught of Bull Run by lining up pails of pebbles and carpet-beaters before him. In the battle's fury he hurled them at dishpans, only pausing to beat a sofa in imitation of rumbling cannons.

"Give us a lot o' Bull Run," said Skippy, "'cause I ain't so sure o' what to say."

"Is there more firing in Bull Run than Gettysburg?" asked Somerset.

"Didn't ya ever see the pictures?"

"Yes, I seen the pictures, but everybody was runnin'."

Here was something Skippy had not figured on: A general—General Grant, no less—sitting at headquarters while all his men were running! He secretly despised the man; but still the whiskers in the sofa had to be used. Otherwise it wouldn't be a play. Here a surge of resentment came over him. Why were all the Confederates in gray whiskers, when sofa stuffing didn't come that way?

Faced with this problem, he sat at a table at headquarters with maps and flickering candles before him, trying to figure out a play. Hearing the restless scuffle out in front, he ordered the curtain raised and prayed for an opening line. Murmurs of admiration swept through the audience as the curtain rose.

"The dead spit of General Grant."

"Just like him."

For five minutes Skippy sat trying to think of something to say; but only the sounds of outside hammering broke the stillness, enlivened by the occasional crackle of a peanut.

"Call this thing a show?" exclaimed Collar Button.

"Who ever heard of a show without firing?" asked another.

"What terrible firing we're getting today," announced Skippy, taking his cue. "My brave men are dying for the good ol' U. S. A."

Skippy waited a moment for Somerset's fusillade of shots; and then in louder tones he shouted again, *"What terrible firing!"*

"Where's the firing?"

"Who ever heard of a play without firing?"

"I'll just look out an' cheer up me dyin' men," said Skippy.

He moved toward the open door and poked his head into the room. Somerset was leaning on the sill, idly cawing at a crow.

"Hey, what about the firing?"

"What firing?" asked Somerset, turning blankly. His face brightened: "Oh, yes, I remember. . . The play."

"They paid to hear drama out here, so give us a little racket on them dishpans!" ordered the general, and returned to his seat with dignity while Somerset flayed the pans. The audience settled down in contentment, satisfied with the new turn the play was taking.

"It's a great show, an' I'm comin' again."

" 'Tain't over yet," cautioned Collar Button.

"Pst! Pst!" hissed Skippy to Ray in the wings.

"Reinforcements! Reinforcements!" gasped Ray, bursting on the scene with a ketchup-daubed handkerchief tied around his forehead.

"Throw in another million men," commanded Skippy. "We'll bust through if it takes all summer!"

"Gettysburg!" howled the audience.

"Bull Run!" corrected Skippy.

"Gettysburg! Boo! Boo! Boo!"

"Quartet! Quartet!" Skippy shouted desperately, and in the nick of time the quartet sprang from the wings, singing: "We are tenting tonight on the old camp grounds, Give us a song to cheer."

In every play a part was reserved for Somerset, who specialized in a clown act. This was always the hit of the show, and drew the crowd. The audience and the cast never knew when to expect the act. Neither did Somerset for that matter, since he worked purely on inspiration and was apt to shoot onto the stage whenever the impulse moved him. While the quartet sobbed to the blending strains of "Dying tonight, dying tonight, dying on the old camp ground," Somerset unexpectedly bounded out in a long nightshirt with whiskers down to his waist.

The sudden shock left the audience spellbound. They didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Some thought it was one of the apostles—others Robinson Crusoe. A few who were up on history figured it was Abraham Lincoln, down at Gettysburg over the week-end.

"Is that you, Jesus?" inquired a small boy.

Somerset seemed hurt; but he became mollified when an older sister took the innocent offender in hand and threatened to report the incident.

"Ladies 'n' gents—" began Somerset.

"O-Our weary hearts, a song of home—"

"—It seems that there was two Irishmen—" continued Somerset.

"—And friends we love so dear—"

"—Be jabbers! sez Pat—"

"—Dying tonight, dying tonight, dying on the old camp ground — the — ol' camp—"

"Aw, shut up! Go on, Somerset."

"Somerset should shut up, the harmony's swell."

Splitting through the quartet, Somerset started his clown act by throwing his body in the air and allowing it to come down with a bumping smack. After the first few flops dizziness began to wear away, and he even became conscious of faint applause; it gained as thuds grew louder.

Somerset formed the letter P as he stooped for a somersault. In a surge of creation, Skippy brought down a barrel stave on Gohagen's rounded anatomy. This stroke of genius saved the play and the author secretly wrote this new line in all future performances of the clown act.

When bean shooters began to appear, Skippy an-

nounced intermission. Removing his whiskers he yelled: "Listen, fellers! We just got to raise money for baseball uneeforms. I got things started—wrote to a couple o' more firms yesterday, but ain't heard nothin' yet. Mustn't there ought to be a way that us can raise a couple o' thousand dollars, huh, what say, fellers?"

"Speech! Speech!" came the chorus.

Somerset, hat in hand, tiptoed up to Skippy, and with very mysterious gestures whispered something in his ear.

"Somerset says Lizzie'll make a cake," announced Skippy. Somerset felt like a martyr during the deafening applause; he was about to whisper again when the contents of a putty blower flattened on his face.

"Just for that ya can't have raisins in the cake!" yelled Somerset. "An' what's more the show's over, 'cause they ain't gonna be any more firing."

"An' after me carryin' a drum up," complained a little figure in the front row. "Now can I have me collar button back?"

"Ya seen the show, didn't cha?" asked Skippy.

"Yeh, but I got to return the collar button 'cause me father's goin' out tonight."

"Well, ya can't and that's all what's to it!"

"After, maybe, can I, huh, after?"

"No!"

"Can I have the drum, then?"

"The drum!" echoed Skippy, aghast.

"I carried it upstairs, didn't I?"

"Get out o' here before we pack ya for a hoise," threatened Skippy, grabbing the door knob on the stage floor.

"I wouldn't come to ya rotten show!" Collar Button flung back as he scampered down the stairs.

"Who is that guy?" Skippy inquired of Somerset as they emerged from the barn.

"I never seen him before, I guess he's new around here."

"Hey, Actor! Can I have me collar button back, huh, can I after, Actor?"

"No!" and Skippy reached for a stone suitable for the occasion.

"Never nothin' does we ever get back in our caboose. Always givin', givin', it is. No wonder we owes an' owes—"

He dodged a scaling stone, and quickened his pace, flailing his fist and palm together in despairing beats.

"But do we get it back? Not so much as a collar button," he soliloquized as he dwindled into the distance. "We just owes an' owes—"

CHAPTER III

SKIPPY hung around Ray's kitchen door long after everybody connected with the show had gone. When quite certain that he was not going to be invited to share a snack with his friends, he departed reluctantly. He even turned to look over his shoulder once or twice as he wandered through the orchard, hoping that Mrs. Marlowe would discover his absence and call him back.

When the odor of corned beef hash sifted through the pantry window, Skippy tried in vain to think of something that he had forgotten. At last he started back toward the kitchen with the hope that something might turn up in the nick of time to justify his return. Drumming on the kitchen window, the willing guest flattened a nose on the glass and peeked into the sunny room. Ray sat before a plate of steaming hash, looking up in silence at the customary tap, while his jaws rotated a lump as big as a door knob.

"I'll see ya next week, then, Ray, huh?" shouted Skippy.

"Yug!" grunted Ray, stuffing another door knob

and chewing steadily. As Skippy watched it dwindle, his friend continued with a reassuring gulp: "Yap, next week."

Seeing Mrs. Marlowe standing over the stove, Skippy said, "Ya should o' seen the show we had this morning, huh, Ray?"

"Ugh!" agreed Ray.

Disgusted, Skippy trailed out of the orchard. "And cheese cake for lunch, no less!" he choked.

As he entered Elm Street he noticed Jim Lovering's horse and milk wagon facing in the direction of his home. Hopping the three-by-four step that divided the wagon between the wheels on either side, Skippy waited for Jim.

Jim slip-slapped out of a house scalloped with architecture and shuffled through the gate. White suspenders strained against muscles bulging under a thin black shirt, as he clicked the gate. Jim turned and his brows dipped like the wings of a gull as Skippy started toward him. The fingers of his right hand clutched empty milk bottles, but the left was always free to stroke a moustache.

"Lo, Jim," greeted Skippy. "Goin' up my way?"

"Well, I been deliverin' milk here for onto twenty years, 'n' I ain't never backed up a street yet," and Jim sucked a corner tooth with evident enjoyment;

" 'N'tain't likely I'm goin' to start now. So hop in."

"Step's good enough for me," returned Skippy, resting on one foot.

"Well, I always says, 'Them what's insured is bound to collect'," and before taking up the reins the milkman glanced at the step. Then gathering in his moustache with his lower lip, he jerked, "Git up, Bess!"

"Did you say you been deliverin' milk here for twenty years, Jim—twenty whole years?" asked Skippy.

"Yes, sir, twenty years," and Jim sucked deep as if to denote a lapse of time.

"Twenty years is a terrible long time, ain't it, Jim?"

"Well . . ." the milkman hesitated, and the under lip gripped the shaggy moustache.

"Pianner legs! Pianner legs!" yelled Skippy to a passing girl.

"Huh!" continued Jim, "some says 'tis and some says 'tisn't!"

"But it is, ain't it, Jim?"

"Well, now I dunno. Sometimes it seems like only yesterday; but when I look at the changes in this town it seems centuries," he sighed. " 'Tain't like it used to be, no sir, not by a long shot."

"Why?"

"Why?" He flapped the reins and pointed to a

house going up. "Hammerin'! Hammerin'! What'll be the end?" Jim scowled.

"What's a little hammerin'?" asked Skippy.

"A little—God!" and Jim spat tobacco juice. "Ya see that match box they's puttin' up? Well, that's just the beginning. All this used to be farms 'round here 'ceptin' Marlowe's. Why, they wasn't mor'n ten houses in the whole town."

"Geet off'n the step!" commanded a boy.

"Pull up ya pants!" retorted Skippy, then, turning to Jim, he inquired, "Do ya mean there was only ten houses in this town—in the very whole town?"

"Yes, sir, ten! 'N' now where they's hammerin' they'll be more 'n' more, or I'll miss my guess, 'n' they'll all look like Christmas cookies, 'n' the crowd that'll live in them will be nothin' but five-hundred-dollar millionaires."

"Say Jim, c'n I drive a while now? Huh, c'n I. will ya, huh, Jim?"

"First the town goes to pot—now you want to drive!"

"Don't ya like the old town, Jim?"

"Oh, the old town's all right, but look what they're doin' to it? Where's a cow goin' to graze with a building goin' up here and there? I'm beginning to hate the very sound of a hammer."

"But when ya say ten buildin's are ya countin' the Fire Department?"

"Fire Department! We was our own Fire Department. Yes, sir, we could swing a bucket brigade better'n those lobsters ya got now, 'n' we didn't get no twenty-five cents a fire, neither—just did it for the town 'n' we couldn't take no pay. Imagine takin' money for a fire! 'N' they call themselves volunteers!" Jim spat from the wagon, and, turning to Bess, he jerked: "Git up, Bess, ya ol' nanny goat. I wish I had a whip. I'd lay it on to you, ya ol' carcass."

"I'll get out 'n' cut you a whip, Jim—look at this for a knife," said Skippy, opening the biggest blade.

"No, never mind, we ain't got time. Besides, I'm goin' to trade her off first chance I get." Jogging along in silence, Jim took in Skippy's uniform. "What cha been doin' all mornin'—dressed up like that?" he asked.

"Playin' a show—didn't ya ever play a show when you was a boy, Jim?"

"Me!" The idea seemed so incredulous that it called for a suck. "When I was a boy I had to be up and doin' at five o'clock 'n' work aroun' the barn."

"Every day?"

"Every day."

"Not Saturdays, though," Skippy insisted.

"Yep, Saturdays, 'n' Sundays too," corrected Jim.

"Didn't ya never go to school?"

"When we had a teacher. Say, you kids don't know what a cinch you got with an up-to-date school, only I will say at that we got more real learnin'. 'N' then it wasn't crowded in by a lot of houses."

"But there isn't a lot o' houses," corrected Skippy.

"No, not yet," Jim drawled. He pointed to a stretch of open fields. "What are ya goin' to do when that's all built up?"

"That'll never be built up!" snorted Skippy.

"No?" slowly. Jim smiled grimly. "Let me tell ya, son, when Krausmeyer picks up property it's alive."

"I never knew Krausmeyer owned that."

"Sure," replied Jim. "He buys 'em when people runs up a bill, then divides them up into lots no bigger'n a cow's stall."

"Somebody ought to stop him!" glowered Skippy.

"Stop him? That worm'd turn on a penny, 'n' stoop to look at the other side."

"I betcha if somebody'd only tell Mr. Hopkins at the town hall, he'd stop him, I betcha. A lawyer could have him locked up!" informed Skippy.

"Hopkins? Bah! He's as useless as a broken key in the door."

As Bess jogged along, her ears twitched at the sudden silence in the back. Gradually she slowed down to a walk, and stopped at last before a home set back from a spacious lawn. By degrees she inched forward until an appetizing branch of elm dangled within reach. A tug, and Bess chopped a choice morsel.

"G'wan, ya ol' cow, cuddin' away at them trees!" Jim chided.

Bess turned at the insult, and, with a glance of reproach gave Jim to understand that they were out in public.

"All right, ol' girl," soothed Jim, and, seeing the ears twitch, he knew he was forgiven.

"What goes here, Jim? I'll take it in."

"Cream . . . oh, Hopkins ain't a bad sort."

Skippy scurried around the path to the back stoop, and Jim listened to the familiar call: "Milk!" Swerving back toward the wagon, Skippy commanded, "Let her go, Jim, I c'n make it. Get up Bess!" Bess didn't budge, and Skippy stopped, spurning to hop on a motionless wagon.

"Git up, ya ol' skeleton!" cautioned Jim.

Skippy waited till the wagon got a good start before taking the running hop. Some small children, seeing this performance, ran for a hitch. With hand

clutching the question-mark handle and off-foot dangling, Skippy turned, shouting, "Geet off'n there, youse kids—d' ya want to get hoited?"

Swinging along on the milk wagon was one of the greatest thrills of Skippy's life. He pictured himself as engineer of the Empire Express, running along the engine with reckless disregard for life; he imagined the dial throbbing at sixty miles an hour, while he coolly inspected the valves. Looking up at an upper corner of the wagon, he suggested, "Say, Jim, let's rout out them wasps."

"I wouldn't go playin' around with them things," warned Jim. "No sir, leastways not wasps."

"No harmfuller than bees," informed Skippy.

"Oh, no?" Jim drawled. "Well, you got lots to learn, son, yes sir, lots to learn."

"Well, why is wasps any worser than bees?"

" 'Cause they got a terrible sting."

"Does it hurt more?"

"It lasts longer."

"What's the reason?"

"Did you ever notice how a wasp is built?" Jim's eyes narrowed with suppressed wisdom. "Just like a woman, 'n' anything built like a woman can sting so's ya'll never forget."

"How do ya know? You was never married."

"No . . . Well . . ." Jim lapsed into silence, and as the wagon passed his door, Skippy hopped off. Going faster than his legs could carry him, he fell in a heap on the lawn.

"Thanks, Jim," he called, and brushing the dirt from his clothes, went into the house whistling.

Jim's hands tightened on the reins as the sound of hammers met his ears. The muscles in his cheeks hardened. For a moment he sat like a lone chieftain, listening to the distant beat of the invader's tom-toms.

CHAPTER IV

When clothes were so terribly worn and shabby as to be rejected by orphan asylums, the neighbors passed them on to Sooky Wayne. This was never done, however, without a surge of Christian sacrifice.

Even so, Sooky's wardrobe consisted of a neatly-patched suit and a long tattered overcoat. After school he wore the overcoat to protect the suit. Despite innumerable pins and reefer buttons, it sagged over his shoes; his feet showed only on the run. As he stood squirming and twisting this baggy coat into all manner of shapes, Skippy watched him anxiously.

"What's eatin' ya, Sook?"

"Aw, it's the pocket!" unhappily. "Everything I put in goes into the linin'!"

"Let's see!" said Skippy, putting his entire arm in before he was thoroughly convinced. As he withdrew it his fingers caught in a slit in the lining; exploring this, he discovered his hand sticking out of Sooky's chest. "Hey! What kind of a coat is this anyway?

Ya could drop a couple o' houses in here an' never know it. Say! I got an idea! Listen! You don't have to take ya hand outa your pocket to put things in your linin', do ya?"

"No. If I wanta pull up me stockin' I c'n do it by putting my hand in me overcoat pocket only," said Sooky.

"Then I know how we c'n get some oranges," cried Skippy.

"How?"

"Easy! All you have to do is stand over Krausmeyer's basket of oranges 'n' drop 'em in your linin' without even takin' ya hand outa ya pocket."

" 'N' what are you goin' to do?" cautiously asked Sooky.

"Just keep him talkin'."

"All right, I'm on!" said Sooky, leading the way to the grocery.

Although stores were centered around the railroad, Krausmeyer's grocery store had the commanding place; he got them coming and going. On the left hand side of the entrance was the bread box; on the right, just out of Skippy's reach, a bunch of bananas dangled over rows of berries so carefully selected that the top layers were without a blemish. No boy ever passed over the worn doorstep without taking hold of

the coffee grinder and spinning it until Mr. Krausmeyer came out of his caged desk opposite. Parallel with the desk, counters stretched to the ice box in the rear. In this, two upper windows displayed "best butter" and "butter." The knife was almost always in the latter. Across from the counters stood rows of baskets containing fruit and vegetables; and in the first row—oranges.

When the pair entered, Krausmeyer looked up from his paper and cautiously puffed a dying butt, held on the end of a toothpick. On Sundays he used a Meerschaum holder, adorned by a creeping lizard; the end of the holder was stained by burning stubs. His eye squinted for a moment through the single pane of his spectacles, and then returned to the financial reports. With a wink, Sooky toyed his way over to the oranges and was well planted before the grocer finally folded up his paper.

"What d'ya want?" he asked.

"How much are the berries ya got out here?" syruped Skippy, leading the unsuspecting grocer outside.

"Sixteen cents a box!"

Meanwhile Sooky's coat was over the oranges, his hand traveling with piston-rod regularity as he dropped them one by one into the lining. To offset

Sooky's winks, Skippy directed the grocer's attention to back shelves.

"How much are the lamp shades up there, Mr. Krausmeyer?" asked Skippy, pointing to the top shelf.

"Twenty-five, fifteen and ten," yawned the grocer.

"What do yer clothes pins sell for?" continued Skippy.

"Nothin' but questions! Questions! Are ya goin' to buy or aintcha goin' to buy?"

"Yes, I'm goin' to buy, but first I gotta know the prices. Now, bird seed, for instance—how much is that? The very best, I mean?"

"Ten cents!" was the surly answer.

"Is it guaranteed?" asked Skippy.

"Did you come in here to buy or ask questions? What d'ya want?"

"A loaf o' bread—a fresh loaf, an' try to pick out one without a moth in it."

With a great many grunts the grocer wrapped up the bread, and made a double entry in his books. Taking the package, Skippy called: "Come on, Sook, let's go!" and started for the door. To hide his nervousness he puckered his quivering lips into a whistle.

Sooky started to follow, but he was rooted to the spot. His arms were pinned by the pressure at the arm pits. Only by straining every muscle could he

manage to drag the bulging coat after him. Had it been loaded with cobble stones it could not have been heavier. Inch by inch he tugged and crept across the floor. Skippy had halted impatiently; thoroughly unstrung by the telltale evidence of the empty basket and the painful plodding of Sooky, struggling toward the door, he beckoned frantically: "Pst! Pst! Hey!"

"Pst! Pst! Me eye!" panted Sooky, stumbling forward in a desperate effort. With a resounding Blump! an orange rolled out from his coat and ambled over the floor.

Sooky froze into silence, his shoulder hunched for an explosion from the grocer. He raised his eyes slowly. Krausmeyer was still immersed behind his paper.

"Come on! Pst!" trembled Skippy.

Sooky raised his foot fearfully. From the depths of his coat a rip caused him to poise, his knee bent rigidly. A second muffled blump! beside his ankles startled him. He lost his balance and wabbled forward. With a splitting rip the lining parted before galloping, bubbling oranges, bouncing merrily on their rolling bellies. In a confusion of blumpety blumps, the entire floor was suddenly alive with scurrying fruit.

Upsetting the stool in his excitement, Krausmeyer

crashed a foot through his newspaper as he half stumbled toward the culprit. Sooky made a last spurt for freedom. His foot cycled an orange, both legs twirled into the air, and with a thud his back squirted orange juice over walls and show cases.

"Come on!" groaned Skippy, tugging at the arm of his helpless friend in despair. As Krausmeyer swerved around the corner of the counter, he pointed to the back of the store:

"FIRE! FIRE!"

Krausmeyer glanced back startled; in the precious fraction of a second Skippy had yanked Sooky to his feet: "Run!"

When well assured that they were no longer followed, Skippy and Sooky slowed down to a walk. Sooky broke the silence in a trembling voice: "Gee, Skippy! May I be strucked dead with thunder an' lightnin' before I ever do that again!"

"Oh! the disgrace of it!" moaned Skippy. "It's terrible! Awful! And all because the linin' of that sack o' yours bustin'!"

"Next time that'll learn me to put a rope aroun' me ankles!"

"Do you run up a bill at Krausmeyer's?" asked Skippy presently.

"No, we pay cash. Some times we have to let it go for a week—not often, though. Do you?"

"We run a bill only by the week, but he won't dare charge us for those oranges, 'cause my father won't pay it 'n' he knows it."

"'N' he won't charge us 'cause we *couldn't* pay."

"He'll charge somebody, though, I betcha. I know Krausmeyer. An orange here is an orange there."

"C'n you imagine!" Sooky exclaimed.

"He can't put anything over on us, though," said Skippy. "'Did your father get my bill?' he sez. 'Yes, my father got your bill, Mr. Krausmeyer,' I sez. 'When will he pay it?' he sez. 'When my father gets good and ready,' just like that I come back. Oh! he hates me, but if they was to put Krausmeyer up in huckleberry jars I wouldn't give that for him. No, sir! Not that!"

"Quart jars?"

"Yes, quart jars."

"Well—"

"No, sir!"

"I hope he don't charge Mom. Gee, that'd be terrible. Ya don't think he will, do ya, Skip?"

"No, he'll put it all on Marlowe's bill, 'cause he lets them run it a long time. Ray says they ain't paid for months."

"Won't they know if he charges them?"

"Oh, no. They're very lovely people, the Marlowes."

"Still, I'd hate like sixty to have my mother know I was swipin', 'cause ya know, Skip, she's funny that way." Sooky paused. "Anyway, I know where I could pick up a little money if I have to pay. Mrs. Tyler is goin' to give me two cents for every load o' wood I get off the new buildin's that's goin' up."

"Easy come, easy go," was Skippy's consoling answer.

"Look, Skip!" and Sooky pointed out some new excavations. "They's goin' to build some more here. Oh, I can pay for them oranges easy now."

"Gee, what a funny lookin' foundation! Why, that's big enough for four houses."

"I wonder how much I could make out o' that?" asked Sooky, pondering.

"Ya know what I'd do if I was you? I'd get all the kids together an' pay 'em a cent for cartin' the wood to Tyler's, then all you'd have to do is stand aroun' an' boss. Just look very smart. Put a pencil behind ya ear."

"Yeh, but I wouldn't only make a cent on a load."

"Listen, Sook, I'll tell ya what ya can do," and Skippy's eyes brightened. "Ask Mrs. Tyler for three cents a load."

"They's somethin' in that . . . Oh, I don't know, though. I'd be scared."

"Go wan, ask for three cents," urged Skippy. "I'd make her pay me five, or bust a couple o' windows. Say! What am I doin' with this bread? I wasn't ast to get it."

"Can't ya take it home anyway?" inquired Sooky.

"It'll look funny."

"Tell ya mother a man gave it to you."

"No, that would never do. She'd only look at me funny like—You take it, Sook, an' if ya mother sez anything, say they was givin' out samples."

"Gee. . . I don't know."

"Here," and Skippy thrust it into his friend's hands, "tell her ya was at a cake sale. She wouldn't doubt a church."

And, thus relieved, Skippy scampered away, heel and toe clattering the road in imitation of a horse galloping.

CHAPTER V

THE dimensions of Barrelhead Boynton's crown and forehead, together with a prominent nose, suggested enormous powers of intellect. However, it was just a large head. Skippy was forbidden to play with Barrelhead, who likewise was cautioned not to associate with Skippy; consequently a warm friendship sprang up between the two boys.

When not engaged in dissecting steam engines and gigantic dynamos, Barrelhead busied himself in perfecting a flourishing style of handwriting. As a result he soon branched out into a promising business answering teacher's notes and writing excuses for the boys in exchange for marbles, tops, and other treasures of the sort. This new endeavor took on such proportions in time that he had an office fitted up in his barn, including a desk on which was inscribed in capitals of a sweeping nature: "Excuses wrote. Carsastik letters a speshulty."

Skippy, feeling the first urge of spring and lament-

ing the confinement of a schoolroom, went to Barrelhead for consolation. In return he was willing to forfeit an ebony umbrella handle, and a bolt he had picked up beside the railroad tracks.

Edging into the barn, Skippy glanced over Barrelhead's shoulder just as he was finishing a long letter.

"What are ya writin'?" he asked.

"An answer from my father to the teacher," hummed the writer, cocking his head to squint at the flourishes.

"I didn't know you got a note home!" gasped Skippy.

"I didn't!" said Barrelhead, "but if they do they won't catch me in my underwear! Look at all these!" and he drew forth a sheaf of answers.

"Are they all the same?" asked Skippy, overwhelmed with the magnitude of the project.

"Nope! They're all different!" answered Barrelhead proudly, spreading them out for inspection. "This one's in case I play hookey, 'n' this one's in case I answer the teacher back, 'n' this one if I pull Gussie Krausmeyer's hair, 'n'—"

" 'N' what's this one?" inquired Skippy, pointing to an exceedingly lengthy document.

"That's in case I sock the Principal!" replied Barrelhead.

"Ya ought to have one in case ya burn the school down," put in Skippy.

"I would, only I don't carry matches!" apologized Barrelhead.

"Listen, Barrelhead! Write me a letter so's I can be excused at two o'clock tomorrow, will ya, huh, write me an excuse?" pleaded Skippy.

"Always the last minute ya come, just as if I wasn't rushed oncst in a while!" whined the expert. "What's in it?"

Skippy answered by showing the umbrella handle and the bolt. Barrelhead instantly rejected the ebony handle; but, after fingering and studying the bolt, he finally accepted it, thinking that possibly an engine might turn up that he could fit it to.

The next day Skippy presented the excuse to the teacher, who studied it carefully. "Would you be so kind as to exkuse Skippy from his studees from school becaws his teeth is in a rotten condishun and he simple must go to the dentiss much as he don't like and oblige corjally yours—Mrs. Dolly Skinner."

Feeling the penetrating glances of the teacher, Skippy put his hand to his mouth and winced in imaginary pain; however, it was not until he had twisted and squirmed himself into a knot that the last doubt of the teacher was removed. Aware that his fate

still hung by a thread, he drew forth a piece of cotton and, with the aid of a match stick, poked it into a supposed cavity.

The afternoon dragged. Noting that it lacked one minute to two, Skippy was on the point of convulsions. It was fully a half minute after the hour before Miss Larkin glanced at the clock. With a gesture she motioned for Skippy to depart.

"Good afternoon, Miss Larkin!" moaned Skippy, skidding his way to the cloak room.

"Good afternoon, Skippy!" replied the teacher in a sympathetic tone.

Having reached the exit on tiptoe, and casting furtive glances in every direction until assured that he was unobserved, Skippy spurted into a frantic sprint out of the school grounds and down the road. Finally, realizing that he was going no place in particular, and that he had actually been released, he dropped into a trot, then a walk, and halted at a place where a building was going up. For a while he looked down at a man busily engaged with a saw.

"Workin'?" he inquired.

The man looked up. A glance suggested that all his reading was confined to alphabet soup.

"Smart boy!" he replied. "Bright! Oh, very smart!"

Skippy searched his face, but it was as bald as the Sahara, so he answered: "Yap!"

"You don't tell me! And does yer old man think yer very smart when yer bring home a flock of D's on yer report card?"

Feeling that the conversation was beginning to lag, Skippy wandered to look for the first violet. Wearying of this, he took to tossing stones, until it suddenly occurred to him that he might catch a bird on the wing. One circled around and Skippy threw at the moving target; missing it, he was about to turn when a resounding KRANG! smote his ears. He wheeled in time to see a carpenter's empty dinner pail, dented, tumble off a pile of boards.

As the angry head of a carpenter appeared through a window, he flung himself down and hugged the ground breathlessly. For some time he lay in the grass, resting on an elbow, and swept his arm lazily over the green for four-leafed clovers. Finding none, he racked his brain for a new pastime. He studied the clouds and tried to make out the forms of lions and tigers. Seeing one that resembled an Easter bunny, he blushed and gave up the game as girlish.

His face rested in the gravel and he noted the progress of an ant, intent on hauling the leg of a large spider between two pebbles. Watching the uneven

struggle, Skippy removed the obstacles, and dusted a path for the ant with his hat. He then placed cobble-stones directly in the insect's path. When the ant finally surmounted this new difficulty Skippy turned on his back and regarded the heavens. His thoughts of Heaven became so laden with embarrassment that he decided to renew his acquaintance with the carpenter. Cautiously advancing to a full fifty feet, he asked the time.

"Half past two, Buddy."

"Giddap, ya ol' nanny goat!"

"Hey, Jim! Jim! Ho, Jim!" Skippy ran toward him.

"Whoa, Bess! Why ain't you in school?"

"I got excused."

"Well, the school certainly gave you an elegant day."

"Oh, they're not a bad crowd."

"They seem to be very nice to you; they hasn't been a nice day yet that I ain't see ya prowlin' aroun'."

"Yes, sir!" and shifting from one foot to the other, he asked, "Can I go with ya, Jim?"

"Not when school is on! I got to be movin' before this hammerin' sends me coo-coo—Giddap, Bess!"

Skippy watched until the wagon disappeared, then returning to the carpenter he watched him work.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"It's damn near three o'clock. Now get out o' here!"

Tired and anxious for the end of the day, the teacher's eyes sought the open windows. They narrowed suddenly. A small moving object rose above the sill, paused for a fleeting second, and disappeared. Suspicious, she watched closely. The little object popped into view again. She pushed back her chair and tiptoed across the room.

"Come inside!" ordered Miss Larkin.

With hanging head and slinking gait, Skippy squirmed into his seat, the object of curiosity. In order to prove that his heart was in the right place, he opened a geography and became absorbed in the contours of Scandinavia. He noted that it lacked but one minute to three; and, taking every book in his desk, he strapped them together ready for departure. These he placed in such a prominent place that the teacher could not help but see he was leaving no stone unturned in his search for knowledge.

"Class rise! Skippy, sit down! Class dismissed!"

Skippy bore the affront in silent indignation. His

longing eyes followed the eager class surging toward the cloak room. Fearing lest he should be the object of pity, he slouched in his seat, with legs sprawling; his eyes glared in defiance. Courage rising to an alarming degree, he even shuffled his feet and whistled in absolute disdain. With reckless abandon, he deliberately yawned a loud *HO-HUM!* Now let the class go out and spread the news that he, Skippy Skinner, wasn't afraid of the teacher, man or beast.

Miss Larkin gathered some papers and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Save for the babel of voices dying in the distance, silence seemed to hang over the room like a pall, except for the regular tick! tick! tick! tick! of the clock. Skippy looked through the open windows, and noticed the darkening sky. Perhaps a thunderstorm would break. His heart thumped violently. Suppose thunder and lightning crashed all around him—where would he get a Bible? He started as the patter of raindrops fell on the window sills; they came down harder and splashed on the desks. Perhaps he should close the windows. Why should he? No! He hoped that they would spoil all the desks, and it would take lots and lots of money to get new ones.

What was happening in the outside world? Skippy suddenly realized that all hammering had ceased. That

was strange. This had been going on steadily for days. Awed by the terrible stillness, Skippy stole sidelong glances at the rows of empty seats. He had never realized there were so many before. Where was the teacher? Why didn't she return? His eyes followed the stretch of blackboards, but everything had been erased, giving the room the gloomy look of a tomb. Weighed down with the depression of the dark schoolroom, he listened for sounds of the outer world, even straining his ears for the friendly bark of a dog, or the call of a pal. Nothing! Not the remotest sound from the distance, only the rattle of the windows and somewhere the muffled creaking of a door, shuddering in a draught. As if awakened from a dream, Skippy became conscious of the uncanny tick! tick! tick! tick! of the clock.

Almost afraid to learn the hour, he shot a stealthy glance at it. Only ten minutes after three! Perhaps something had happened to the hands. He stared at them so long that his eyes watered, but they never moved.

The whistle of a passerby attracted Skippy's attention. He heard the clank of an empty dinner pail. Was it the carpenter going home? The sound grew fainter and fainter, and died in space. Almost at the point of tears, Skippy prayed for the return of the

teacher. In his awful loneliness he wondered if she had forgotten him. Perhaps she had gone long ago. Maybe the school was already locked for the night, and he was alone, friendless. He pondered over possibilities of slow starvation. Not a crumb to save him in his desolation. Skippy pictured himself being found the following day sitting bolt upright, worn to a skeleton, while the accusing hands of his friends, all heart-broken, pointed to the sobbing teacher. This mental picture became so vivid with martyrdom that his eyes blurred in self pity.

The approaching footsteps of the teacher shattered the dream. Skippy coughed with friendliness, but Miss Larkin ignored his advances. She sat down and became engrossed in writing. For the next three minutes Skippy listened to the scratching pen, fear clutching his heart. Finally she folded a letter, placed it in an envelope, and sealed it with a decisive pound of the fist.

"Take this note home to your father and do not return until you have an answer!" The teacher placed the dreaded letter in the numb hand of Skippy.

He fumbled it, and choked a good night that quivered the lips. His legs moved by instinct, but the paralyzed mind did not begin to function until he discovered that he was headed in the wrong direction.

Then his surging resentment gave way suddenly to a burst of anger, and he sent the strapped books crashing in the thicket. This was followed by a shower of rocks. He was about to go on when something prompted him to pick up the books, and even wipe them off.

Skippy wandered aimlessly. Putting his hand in his pocket, the fingers grazed the note, sending an electric shock through his system. Fearfully he clutched it between thumb and forefinger, and wondered how he could squirm out of his trouble. In a flash the thought of Barrelhead's letters occurred to him. Almost light hearted, Skippy tore into a sprint, headed for his friend's house.

Heated and out of breath, he entered the barn; but Barrelhead was nowhere to be found. Retracing his steps to the house, Skippy cupped his hands over his mouth and called: "Hey, Barrelhead! Yoo Hoo!"

A sash was flung open in an upper room, and Barrelhead poked his head out of the window. He was clad in pajamas. "I dasn't come out!" said Barrelhead.

"Why dasn't ya come out?"

"Because my father found all those answers I wrote to the teacher 'n' he thinks he got wrote to. I told him I was just practicin' but he wouldn't beleeve it

'n' now I have to stay in my room 'cause he thinks I socked the Principal. Said he's goin' to make me 'pologize."

"But listen, Barrelhead, I . . ."

"Cheese it, someone's comin'!" Barrelhead closed the window and disappeared like a porpoise in a wave.

Skippy was bewildered, like a sailor in a heavy sea who has had a life preserver suddenly snatched from his outstretched hands. He crossed the street and halted behind a figure squatting over a mud puddle, intent on moulding pies.

"An' we owes an' owes," chanted the clay modeller to himself, "owes an'. . ."

A swift movement from the rear and Collar Button suddenly embraced the puddle, face downward, like a tiger skin before a fireplace.

He squirmed and sat up dripping. "Hey, Actor, give us back me collar button!" He flipped mud from the corner of his eyes. "Will ya, huh, Actor?" he called after the retreating figure of Skippy, "will ya, huh, maybe, after?"

CHAPTER VI

MORRISVILLE school consisted of eight grades, each class having its own teacher. To fill these classes, children came from adjoining towns and neighboring farms. The school itself was a two-story wooden building with a tower in which hung a large bell that could be heard for miles.

Miss Larkin stood at the entrance of her class from the first to the last bell and greeted each pupil as he entered. She was tall and stately, with hair wound up in the shape of a cruller. The eyelids were extremely heavy with prominent veins, giving the impression that she had just finished crying, or was about to cry. They seemed to have been invented for the express purpose of looking down on little boys. When she talked to adults it seemed easier for her to throw her head back, instead of raising the lids.

The pupils began to arrive in groups.

"Good morning, Miss Larkin!"

"Good morning, Harold!"

"Good morning, Miss Larkin!"

"Good morning, Joseph!"

"Good morning, Miss Larkin!"

"Good morning, Frederick!"

"Good morning, Miss Larkin!"

"Just one moment!" coldly answered the teacher. "Did you get an answer to that note?"

"N'm," gulped Skippy with downcast eyes, as his foot tried to loosen a board from the floor.

"Didn't I tell you not to come back without an answer?"

"Yes'm, but I'm afraid to show the note to my father, Miss Larkin, I am, because I know what he'll do. He'll beat me and send me away 'n' I don't want to be taken out of this school. I know I done wrong—"

"Did wrong!"

"Did wrong, but I came here today to ask for another chancst. I know I don't deserve it, but I'm afraid to show it, honest, Miss Larkin! You don't know my father. He'll beat me with an iron chain, yes, sir! an iron chain, 'n' after all I'm only a little boy."

The thought of a ferocious, snarling giant, flaying his small body with a huge ferry-boat chain was too much for Skippy's imagination, and he gave way to a flood of tears. His whole frame shook with sobs. Miss Larkin, not being made of stone, laid her hand

on his head. "If I give you another chance, will you promise never to do it again?"

"Oh, yes'm! 'n' when strawberries are ripe I'll—"

"Never mind the strawberries! You may go inside!"

While pleased with the outcome of the interview, Skippy felt that he could have stood a little more of the giant crushing his bones with the ferry-boat chain. It had all the possibilities of a good cry. Skippy decided to nurse it along for the first spell of sadness.

With a new lease of life, Skippy made up his mind to carry out the promise to the letter. During recitation he sat bolt upright, only inclining his head in a listening attitude when Gussie Krausmeyer bungled "The Village Blacksmith" in her customary hair-lipped style. Skippy accented each stanza with interpretative nods of: "Very, very good!" and "Well done!"

Gussie's reading generally provoked unnecessary restlessness and scuffling of the feet among the boys, to say nothing of paper wad flappings. At this Skippy turned, and knitted his brows, annoyed. This was answered by at least a dozen wads flapping at his neck, with mutters of, "Teacher's pet!" and "Traitor!"

Whenever Miss Larkin wrote on the blackboard, an undertone of cow mooings would hum through the room, stopping instantly when she turned. If there

was one thing dear to Skippy's heart, it was a steady even hum of cow mooings. It soothed his mind and rested his nerves. A day spent at school without cow mooings was a day lost. To be in the midst of a well regulated moo, and yet a rank outsider, was something that tore at his heart strings. Previously he would have held such a being in contempt.

From right to left and the rear, pokes came from mooers urging him to take up the refrain. Only by gritting his teeth could he resist the gorgeous hum. Even though every head was bent in study, his friends felt the missing moo keenly; for Skippy was considered by far the best mooer in the school.

The mooings stopped abruptly when a little girl from another class entered, bearing a note, which she handed to the teacher. Miss Larkin read it, then looked up and announced: "Chester Boynton is wanted in the Principal's office!"

Barrelhead listened with a frozen face, then rose and reeled down the aisle. When he arrived at the door he groped for the knob as if blindfolded, and staggered out, leaving the door wide open. He was the one boy who had gotten a string of A's in deportment as far back as the class could remember. The boys were so filled with curiosity that they completely

forgot that they had been interrupted in their morning moo.

The study period at an end, the teacher was about to conduct the history lesson, when the same little girl reappeared bearing another note which she handed to the teacher. While Miss Larkin read it, the prim messenger invited the envy of all the girls by openly turning up her nose at the simple examples on the blackboard. It was known that she belonged to the next class over this one.

Miss Larkin arose and smoothed the wrinkles in her dress and adjusted her hair in a small hand mirror, throwing her head back for the purpose. This done, she addressed the class: "I am going down to the Principal's office."

The class listened flabbergasted. What could be the matter? What had Barrelhead done?

"Now, children," announced the teacher, "I am going to make Skippy monitor, and I want every boy and girl to keep in order. Otherwise he will take the names of those who give him the slightest trouble," and she swept out of the room.

What was all this, a joke or something? Had a circus bought the school? Would a man with riding breeches and high hat enter, snapping a whip over

a white horse and bareback rider? Or were they playing "Alice in Wonderland"?

No one was more stunned than Skippy. He sat gaping in open-eyed astonishment. In a daze he made his way to the teacher's seat. The room was so still that the dropping of a pin would have echoed. Perhaps the class was waiting for the entrance of a tramp clown chased by a funny cop. At any rate no one stirred.

Skippy could just manage to see over the row of books on the teacher's desk. He fixed the class with such a menacing look that it would have done credit to a two-gun man.

The flush of authority was rising with alarming degree. As the class watched in open-eyed amazement, Skippy first selected a book from the rack with a title large enough for the class to read, "French Words and Phrases." He scanned the pages with great interest, and even turned back to re-read some choice idiom that evidently appealed to his sage-like fancy. With the air of one who knew the contents by heart, he next selected a thicker book, titled: "Greek and Latin Scholar." This seemed to contain something for which he had ransacked the Public Library in vain, and here it was in the class all the while. At last he and the teacher had something in common.

Reluctantly returning it to the rack to resume his duties as monitor, he started clearing the desk by blowing off some specks that annoyed him. Then he adjusted the ink-well to suit his taste. This done, he opened the desk drawers and brought forth a nail file, and yawningly applied it to his fingers. He was the Board of Education itself. But when he withdrew a sheet of blank paper, coolly sharpened his pencil and shot a suspicious glance at the class—that was the spark that blew up the powder works. A veritable blizzard of paper wads whizzed through the air, followed by blackboard erasers and even books. Shouts of mutiny filled the air.

"Teacher's pet!" howled Sooky.

"Traitor!" corrected Ray.

Skippy instantly looked out of the window with frowning eyes, as if the offending words had been uttered by a couple of mooing cows grazing in a nearby pasture.

"Meeow!" yelled the boys.

Skippy began to write as if he could not use up a page fast enough. This only served to fan a roaring fire. As each offender imagined his name jotted down he howled in derision. But Skippy was not unnerved; he only wrote faster. Suddenly a heart-rending cry from Gussie Krausmeyer caused him to look up in

alarm. Ray Marlowe held her by the braids while Sooky plastered her face with ink.

"Yow! Help!" yelled poor Gussie.

This was carrying things too far. With eyes blazing, Skippy raised his voice above the din. "Gussie Krausmeyer," he commanded, "stop that noise!"

The boys answered by giving Skippy the nanny goat "Meh-eh-eh's."

Skippy stood upon the chair and faced the class, unmindful of the paper wads and marbles whizzing past his face. His underlip protruded as he fiercely shouted:

"Class ten—shun!"

To enforce his command, Skippy stamped indignantly on the seat of the chair. His foot instantly shot through the cane bottom, and losing his balance, he toppled over headlong against the blackboard with a crash.

At the sudden smash, followed by the disappearance of the monitor, the class gazed in amazement at the naked space behind the teacher's desk. A brief moment of stillness was shattered by frantic scrambling and the clatter of a chair. The next instant Skippy's face, red and perspiring, bobbed up over the desk, like a Jack-in-the-box.

"Gussie Krausmeyer," he strangled, "stand in the corner!"

Glaring the class into submission, he sank with dignity into the chair; the empty skeleton immediately gulped him whole. With the better part of his anatomy dangling below the round wooden frame of the broken seat, his chin rested firmly against his knees, and his arms flapped helplessly on either side. The shattered cane pricked him to the skin, like gnawing sand fleas suddenly besieged by an enemy.

Hearing the door open he made a last desperate effort to free himself, but the cavity held him like a vise. He turned his head and looked into the large brown eyes of a girl who stood in the doorway, gazing at his sunken form in mild astonishment.

Skippy felt the blood nourishing the roots of his hair as his eyes unconsciously surveyed the newcomer from head to foot. He stared at the jet black hair parted over her pretty face, and the flash of dimples as she smiled. Her stiffly-starched dress flared like a circus rider's. Enchanted, Skippy could not take his eyes off this vision of loveliness.

"Is this Miss Larkin's class?" she asked.

Skippy struggled to answer, but he became so flustered that only a wheezing sound emerged from some

inner region of his throat. In contrast to this ideal of a bare-back rider, stepped suddenly from a flaming circus poster, he felt like the most grotesque freak in the side show as he squirmed under her penetrating gaze. The only things lacking, he felt, were the little photographs of himself flaunting his deformity.

"Yes, Kid, this is Miss Larkin's class."

It was the voice of Somerset Gohagen. Oh, the insufferable insolence, "Kid"!

"Silence!" gulped Skippy from the region of the desk.

"Meh-eh-eh-eh-Mooaw! Mooaw!" chorused the boys.

The approaching steps of the teacher roused Skippy to action.

"Gussie Krausmeyer, be seated," panted Skippy, as he kicked his legs and flapped his arms in a last wild effort to release himself.

"What is this?" Miss Larkin paused in amazement at the sight of Skippy half way through her chair. "Ray! Joseph! give me a hand here."

Released at last Skippy slunk to his seat, ashamed to raise his eyes. He slid down onto the small of his back and strove to be as inconspicuous as possible. Miss Larkin turned to the new pupil.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Carol Sharon."

"Carol Sharon," repeated Skippy to himself. "Carol Sharon." He raised his eyes for a moment to the vision, only to lower them and blush until the very lids felt hot.

Miss Larkin picked up the paper on which Skippy had been scribbling. She studied it for a second or two, amid the scowls of the class, and then laid it on her desk. The sheet was a mass of squares, circles, and smoking steam engines; although the letters GU had been started, they were crossed out now beyond recognition.

CHAPTER VII

RETURNING from lunch, Skippy entered the schoolyard and found Barrelhead Boynton surrounded by a group of admiring classmates, all asking questions. Skippy tried to draw him aside; but Barrelhead scarcely knew him, and refused to be enticed from the circle of which he was the hero. Basking in glory was something new to him, and he cherished every second. Skippy hovered around the circle and listened to the questions, hoping that Barrelhead would drop a choice morsel.

"Did he use the piece of hose on ya?" asked one.

"On me! Him use the hose on me!" Barrelhead exclaimed.

"What did he say to you when ya went in?" asked another.

"He started a wise crack, 'n' I picks it up 'n' sez, 'Where d'ya get that stuff, Principal?' "

"That's right!" chimed in Somerset. "Them's the very words he told me!"

"What did ja father say?"

"What could he say?"

To all questions as to the why and wherefore of his summons to the office, Barrelhead showed such an air of mystery that some began to sniff murder. These few fairly groveled in worship.

In as much as the bell was about to ring any minute, Skippy withdrew to the classroom. Barrelhead and his cheering throng soon followed. Skippy made one or two overtures to his friends, but they would have none of him. The thought of his recent traitorous action still rankled in their minds. Even Somerset, whom he had always counted on, seemed cold and aloof. Skippy sat alone, ostracized and friendless.

The first period of the afternoon was devoted to physical culture under the direction of a Mr. Dippley, who visited the school once a week. Mr. Dippley entered the class at the stroke of one. He was short and fat, with knees that hugged so close that they subtracted a full inch from his height. He wore a frock coat, and his trousers wrinkled like the rear of a hippopotamus. He had the general appearance of a senator out of work.

"Good afternoon, Miss Larkin," puffed the instructor.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dippley."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dippley," greeted the class.

"Did Mr. Dippley say 'Good afternoon, my children'?" The instructor turtled his chubby neck, and peered over a pair of glasses about to skid from a pudgy nose. "Deportment, my children, deportment!" Pinching his glasses, he continued: "At any cost, let us observe deportment. Next to physical culture it is the redeeming quality of mankind. As we go through life—however, however——"

"Has the class forgotten what Miss Larkin said about deportment?" asked the teacher.

"No matter! no matter!" interrupted Mr. Dippley, seating himself in the only chair. "Class, tenshaw!" he bellowed in what he thought was a military voice.

The pupils were rigid.

"Hand salute, hep! Ah! ah! the hand salute is given at an angle of forty-five degrees—watch!" Mr. Dippley raised his arm, but promptly dropped it when the sleeve started to split at a thirty degree angle. "My boy," he remarked, "we're not looking for Indians."

Someone tittered, and Mr. Dippley secretly chuckled and made note of the remark. Purring, his eyes raked the rows of up-raised arms. Then in buttered tones he said, "Good afternoon, my children."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dippley."

"tuh!" The aching arms dropped.

"Class, stand! We will now have marching exercises. When I say 'Forward march,' the first row will step off on the left foot, and when the last one has marched from the aisle, the second row will follow, and so on through each succeeding aisle. . . . Fawurrred . . . HO!" commanded Mr. Dippley, in a voice loud enough to start the neighborhood dogs barking. The first boy to step off never moved.

"Why didn't you march?" blustered the teacher.

"Because you said to ho."

"Stand in the corner!" Thus dismissing the objector, Mr. Dippley turned to the class and shouted again, "Fawurrred, march! . . . Left, left, left, left turn, ho! . . . Those two boys whispering—stand facing the blackboard. . . . Hep, hep, hep! Hands on hips, raise! Inhale! Hep! Hep! Hep! Exhale! Again, inhale—deep! deep! deep!" Annoyed by Somerset's raised hand, Mr. Dippley paused: "Well, what is it?

"The teacher we had before always raised the windows when we blew our breaths," enlightened Somerset.

"Report to the office! Left—uh—I didn't tell you to mark time," bellowed Mr. Dippley, as his eyes travelled along the line and stopped at a boy who stood kicking against the wall. "That first boy—why didn't you keep on marching?"

"Because you didn't say, 'left turn, ho!'"

"Report to the office! Left turn, ho! hep, hep, hep, now when you come to your aisles march down and mark time at your places, hep, hep, hep, hep."

When every one was in his place marking time, Mr. Dippley mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief. Putting it away, he commanded: "Body bending exercises—uh—as you were! Cla-ass, halt! We will now take up the 'about face.' This is done by turning on the heels while both feet are together—in this manner."

Eager to illustrate his point, Mr. Dippley swiveled, lost his balance and spun like a dying top. His groping hands sent books and erasers helter-skelter. With flapping arms, he managed to regain his equilibrium and, as if fearful of another spin, or perhaps to exhibit superhuman powers, Mr. Dippley bounced on his toes with jaunty hops. Three boys went to the office.

The sight of Mr. Dippley bobbing up and down was too much for Skippy. Choking with stifled giggles, he only managed to control himself by imagining his father and mother being dragged to a chopping block by a robber, who promptly hacked them up into little pieces. Even at this scene of injustice, he broke into a series of giggles, until shame filled his very soul. Rippling with titters, Skippy alternated the scene to a

railroad track, and pictured his mother in the path of the Empire State Express, carrying a basket of fruit and a football for his birthday. As the Express struck, Skippy moaned: "Oh! My poor dear Mama!" and became convulsed with giggles.

"That boy with the polka dot tie," shouted Mr. Dippley, "stand out in the cloak room!"

Skippy walked down the aisle, imitating a bandy-legged man, and by so doing sent two girls to the office for tittering.

Out in the cloak room Skippy gave vent to suppressed giggles. Thus relieved, he wiped the tears from his eyes, and then snooped through the various lunch boxes in hopes that a piece of cake might turn up to justify his search. He was in the act of doing this when the sound of steps, heavy steps, smote his ears. He listened, panic stricken. They were coming nearer and nearer, headed direct for the cloak room. With a stab of terror, he recognized the voice of the Principal.

Realizing that no time was to be lost, Skippy ducked behind a coat, trembling in fear. Cautiously he peeked from behind the cover. The Principal was accompanied by the local carpenter.

"Seems to me there can be a change here," rumbled

the Principal. "They don't need all this space for a cloak room, and we simply have to crowd in more desks before long."

Skippy saw the carpenter point to the opposite wall. "Why not put all these coats over there? You don't need this wall—we can knock it out."

"All right, let's try it," said the Principal, gathering the wraps from the hooks. The carpenter followed his example.

Skippy, numb with fear, dared not peek. In a daze he listened as the coats were plucked one by one from the hooks. At any minute he would be discovered. Already he could feel a draught on his right and left. They stopped. Had he been detected? Why was he not told to come out? He peered cautiously under a sleeve.

They were studying a blue paper with white lines on it. Skippy frowned. This blue paper must be very important, because all the carpenters working on the new houses did the very same thing. Carpenters were something new in Skippy's life, and their recent arrival puzzled him. Instinctively he seemed to distrust them. Perhaps it was because Jim always complained about their hammering. Why should he fear them? They didn't hit little boys with hammers. Maybe it was just Jim's way.

In a flash Skippy realized that the backs of the two men were turned from him toward the other side of the cloak room. Holding his breath, Skippy tiptoed across the floor and hid behind a coat that protected him. It was Gussie Krausmeyer's. His relief was so great that he breathed a prayer of thanks into every seam.

The few remaining coats were removed from the opposite wall and hung on his right. Except for a little perspiration, he was getting back to normal. He felt the hotness of his breath recoiling from the woolly garment, and at this moment, when safety was in his grasp, the voice of the Principal bellowed in his ear: "Come out!"

Half paralyzed, Skippy edged away from the coat.

"More!" commanded the Principal.

With closed eyes, Skippy took another step and waited for the blow.

"Come out! Come out!" The voice was too sharp to be ignored.

Skippy looked up, dumbfounded. The Principal had his back turned to him and was motioning to the carpenter, who held a folding rule through the hall and cloak room door. Again the folds of the coat sheltered him and he leaned back exhausted. "Let's go to the next room," came the Principal's voice. "Even if

we can only squeeze in an extra row of desks in each class, that will serve for the present. We'll start work on that new wing as soon as vacation arrives."

Skippy listened until the last sound of the departing feet died before he dared to move. He emerged from behind the coat just in time to catch the teacher's signal to return to the class.

After school, Barrelhead buttonholed Somerset to tell him more about his experience in the office; but Somerset's eyes were on the group ahead. In the center of this crowd was Skippy with his coat over his head, yelling: "Come out! D'ja hear—damn ya!"

Gohagen wrenched himself away and tore off to the crowd, slowly followed by Barrelhead.

When the crowd had scattered, Skippy and Sooky walked home together. "Ya know, Skip," confided Sooky, "I was worried when ya started writin' at the teacher's desk this mornin', 'cause I thought the whole gang'd have to stay after school."

"Aw, you guys oughta know that I ain't to be took for a tattle tale," answered Skippy.

"Yeh, we didn't really think you'd go slittin' us up the back, but I was a little leery when Miss Larkin made us pick up them marbles. I thought we'd all have to stay after school, an' gosh, I had to go get wood. Say, I forgot to tell ya! Mrs. Tyler's givin'

me three cents a load now, an' besides I got another customer."

"What are ya goin' to do with all ya money?" asked Skippy.

"Oh, I don't know—I was thinkin' o' gettin' Mom a hat or somethin', so's she can go out on Sundays."

"I'll help ya this afternoon, Sook."

"Oh, that'll be great. I'll race ya to the buildin'. Ready?"

"Ready," announced Skippy, and crouched until his fingers touched the ground.

"One—two—three!" and Sooky sprinted forward, only to drop behind Skippy as the folds of his long coat wrapped his legs.

"I'll wait for ya," yelled Skippy over his shoulder, "but don't be long."

When they arrived at the building, Sooky motioned for Skippy to enter.

"Will the carpenters let ya go in?" asked Skippy.

"Oh, sure. I can take wood just so's it ain't over a foot long."

"Why does it have to be only a foot long?"

"Well, they don't want me takin' big pieces, that's the reason."

"That's a lot o' bother tryin' to figure out how long every piece o' wood is ya pick up."

"I've got to, though. That's what they said."

"I got an easier way than that," said Skippy. "I'll measure off them long boards with a foot rule, an' then we can take turns sawin' them up."

"Hello, Joe," Sooky greeted one of the carpenters.

"Hello, Sooky, how's ya heart?" answered the carpenter.

"Oh, so, so, Joe!"

Skippy was warmed by the fraternal spirit that existed between Sooky and the workman. He felt proud to be in such company.

"Come on up, Skip," and Sooky ascended a ladder. Skippy followed. Arriving at the second floor Sooky climbed to the attic, Skippy still behind him. Half of the floor was covered with loose boards, and the remainder was open.

"Gee, it makes me scared up here, Sook. Ya can see right down to the cellar. Let's go down."

"What ya skeered of?" replied Sooky, and balancing himself, he walked over the open beams. "I do this all the time. After a while ya get so ya don't think nothin' of it."

"Please don't, Sook. I'm afraid you'll fall."

"G'wan, I see the carpenters do this all the time. Wanta see a trick they learned me."

"No, I'm goin' to go down. We can get the wood we want on the ground."

"No, ya can't, if ya want to get all of it. I always start up at the attic first."

"Well, I ain't allowed to go in the buildin's."

"All right, Skip. Let's go then."

After they had taken ten loads of wood to the Tyler house, Sooky knocked at the door for his money.

"That was ten loads, wasn't it, Sooky?" asked Mrs. Tyler. "You'll be around tomorrow?"

"I don't think we'll be around tomorrow, Mrs. Tyler," interrupted Skippy, "'cause my mother's goin' to give me an' Sooky five cents a load for all the wood we can pick up." Noticing that Sooky was about to speak, Skippy gave him a kick. "Yes, sir, five cents a load."

"Well, that's awfully high," pondered Mrs. Tyler, "but I'll pay five cents a load too, if you come around."

"Sooky can come, I guess, but I got to work for my mother."

"Sure, I'll come." Sooky gasped. "You betcha."

"See how I do things?" queried Skippy when they were alone. He tilted his hat over one eye, and added, with a snap of his fingers, "Just like that!"

"Gee—that's wonderful! Think of it! Five cents a load."

"Well, I got to go, Sook. S'long."

"S'long, Skip."

Sooky stood looking at the fleeing figure for some time and then turned toward his home.

"If that guy was a toitle, he'd whack up his shell with a pal." Sooky chuckled, and imitated Skippy's snap of the fingers, "Five cents I get, just like that."

CHAPTER VIII

MORRISVILLE awoke to the din of the barnyard, almost forgetful of the incessant hammering that had now come to be part of its daily life. The steady beat had stopped, but only for a day. It was Easter and bells chimed peaceful tidings.

Mr. Skinner looked upon Sunday as workbench day. However, nothing short of a pipe burst would keep him from church on Easter. He set this day aside religiously. With a spirit of vacation, he dressed, happy with the thought that he could gaze on the surpliced figure of his boy, singing an Easter solo. When the collection plate was passed he gave more than he could afford, and without the slightest regret refrained from cigars for a week.

Skippy halted outside the closed bathroom where his father was splashing in the tub. "Papa, mama says not to forget to use the fuzzy towel."

"Tell mama if she isn't careful I'll get out every embroidered forget-me-not she has and use it."

"I dare ya! I betcha ain't got the nerve—have ya, now?" Skippy hopefully inquired.

"Sure!" answered his father, splashing.

"I'll get them!"

"Hold on there! I have a towel!"

"Yeh! You're afraid! 'Fraid cat!" Then with a more ominous tone Skippy added, "No, sir! Nobody 'round this house would dare to do that!" Putting his mouth to the keyhole, he whispered, "Bacon 'n' eggs this mornin' 'n' buckwheat cakes with real syrup," then with squeaky shoes and a swishing sound he was down the banisters.

In another part of town the home of Sooky Wayne squatted in a bramble of weeds. The parched house blistered and peeled into thousands of ugly crackles. A slipshod picket fence stretched in front of it like a row of drunken sentinels. Shafts of sunlight sifted through dangling shutters into the room where Mrs. Wayne and Sooky sat at breakfast.

"Mama, yesterday Mr. Krausmeyer said he won't give no more trust to us! 'N' he said it right out loud before everybody, 'n' Tillie Marvin 'n' Gertie Sutton laughed!" With lowered eyes he half choked, "They laughed!"

"You mustn't mind them, son. Besides, they don't know any better."

"Well, anyway, I wish you didn't have to sew for them!"

"Shucks! You go 'long and put on that suit I brought home; it's all cleaned so you can go to the choir —remember it's Easter Sunday."

"Aw, ma! I can't! I just can't! Everybody knows it belonged to Arnold Baxter—really they do! I heard them whisper!"

"I met Skippy last night and he said he was going to make you go to church—even if he had to come here and pull you out!" smiled the mother.

"Skippy can't neither! Not if I don't want to. Besides I ain't afraid of him! Who did he ever lick?" pouted Sooky, then sulkily continued, "It's all right for Skippy Skinner to talk! Look at the clothes he's got—never hand-me-downs!"

The mother made no reply, but started scraping the dishes. Feeling that he had wounded her, Sooky went over and put his arms around her, then looked up into the face crossed by the bars of sunlight that alternated with the purple shadows of the shutters.

"Aw, ma! You know I don't care, don't cha, ma? Some day I'll get a job 'n' you won't have a thing to do but hoe the garden. Even now I get five cents a load cartin' wood."

"I'm afraid to have you going in those buildings, son; you might get hurt," said his mother.

"How can I get hurt?"

"I wish you wouldn't. It worries me," Mrs. Wayne answered.

"It's easy money—Say, Ma, you wash an' I'll dry. What say?"

Mrs. Wayne answered by pressing the tousled head to her bosom. A few minutes later the whistle of Skippy brought Sooky to the window, polishing a dish.

"Hey, you! Ain't you comin' to church?" was Skippy's greeting.

"I can't."

"What's the reason ya can't?"

"'Cause!"

"'Cause why?"

"'Cause—that's why, Skip."

Something in the pair of eyes, peering through the closed shutters, brought the truth home to Skippy clearer than any explanation. For the first time, conscious of his new suit, Skippy became embarrassed, half sorry he came. Conversation seemed to die and leave him uneasy. With hat-twistings and swivels he wormed his way backwards, then, jerking himself together, he cried, "See you again, Sook!" and fled.

When Skippy arrived at the choir door of the church most of the boys were already clad in their Easter starched surplices that hid threadbare cassocks almost green with use. He lost no time in donning his cas-

sock, but he looked in vain for the clean surplice he had placed on the shelf the night before.

"Who's got my surplice?" he cried and, without waiting for an answer examined everybody's for initials on the inner hem. He finally discovered it on the person of Somerset Gohagen, the cross-bearer.

"Take it off!" he commanded.

"Oh, is this yours?" sheepishly asked Somerset, taking it off.

"Who's got my surplice?" Somerset wildly inquired, repeating the performance of Skippy until it was discovered, as Ray Marlowe was retreating to the church yard.

"Look here, fellers! Someone has mine! D'ja hear?" demanded Ray.

"Less noise in here!" commanded the organist and choir-master, poking his head through the altar door. As the commotion ceased, Ray's small brother appeared at the outer door.

"Ray, you forgot to take your surplice!" he breathlessly exclaimed, handing it to him.

Fixing the rest of the choir with menacing eye, Ray remarked, "Just the same, I don't want anybody using my surplice!"

"Shh! Quiet!" cautioned the organist from the altar door.

"Quiet, fellers, quiet!" bellowed Somerset.

Skippy was about to bring his hymnal down on Gohagen's head when he was arrested by the minister's eye. He altered his motion to a stretching yawn. The minister turned and peeked through the crack of the door. Sunday after Sunday he surveyed his scattered flock in this manner, and today he was rewarded by the sight of an overflowing congregation.

There was Mr. Krausmeyer, the grocer, trying in vain to entice a nod from Mr. Nubbins, the wholesale feed man. Mr. Nubbins, however, was distracted and overawed by the presence of the town banker, who, secure in his position, showed his superiority by fixing a tolerant gaze on the saints in the stained glass windows. Mr. Krausmeyer, failing to attract the notice of Mr. Nubbins, contented himself by focussing his attention on the forlorn figure of Cyrus Bent, the bookkeeper, while his mind itemized Cyrus's bill, long in arrears. Snubbed by the banker, Mr. Nubbins's eyes raked the grocer with a withering fire. The wrinkled eyes, peering through the choir door, rested over all, contemplating.

With the tremulous roll of the organ, pumped by the boy on the choir waiting list, the choir formed and sang the first verse of the Processional in their room. At

the second verse, they started out in double column, with Somerset leading the way.

Overcome with the large attendance, Somerset had an overwhelming desire to turn drum major, and only stifled the desire by darting innumerable glances upward. He was swayed by his own piousness almost to the point of tears as the voices in his rear sang: "Hallelulya! Hallelulya!"

Intoxicated by the stares of the congregation, Somerset fairly perspired with divine fire. Once he had visited a city church and marvelled fascinated, at the gliding movement of the choir; this, he had observed, had been accomplished by alternating their long stride with short steps. This mental picture recurred to him now in a flash, and without hesitation he shot into a long skating stride, followed by two jolting hops. He straightened and waited on the hops as if he were about to halt. Turning his head, he noticed that the two surprised choristers were gaining. Instantly he sailed into a stride so long that a faint rip was audible. A woman snickered and immediately bowed her head in prayer.

The startled choir, alarmed by the increasing gaps in the procession, followed Somerset like a group of hockey players. They swerved around the back of the

church and glided up the center aisle toward the altar. The men in the choir sauntered down the other aisle. Those following in Gohagen's wake lost their places and sang different verses.

Upon reaching the steps of the altar, Somerset halted and glanced around. He waited for the procession to close in on him like the pleats of an accordion. It was only under pressure and nudges that he resumed an even pace and placed the cross in the altar rack.

Somerset joined in the singing that followed, wholly unconscious of the smiles in the congregation.

When the minister stepped in his pulpit, he calmly gazed over his listeners. He did not speak. There was something in the patient face that held the congregation. Even the choir looked up expectantly. Someone coughed nervously and the church was still. The Rev. Somme advanced.

"There is no sin when one acts in the spirit of righteousness," he said slowly. "Sincerity is the spiritual staff by which we climb to understanding, and it is only by slipping that we strengthen our grip on all things. After all, God gives us the shadows in order to prove the light."

The congregation leaned forward for an inspired note had crept into their pastor's voice.

"Our lives go on with every beat of the heart;" he

continued, "Oh, brothers, know that this beat is vital to us all. If we could swing our thoughts into the rhythm of the beating heart, we would harmonize with eternity and peace everlasting. We have the power within us to mould our lives with every beat of our hearts; either for construction or destruction. On every side in our daily life we hear the discordant beat of the hammer."

The minister had now discarded the notes of his prepared sermon. With arm raised high overhead, he shook it in the air, and appealed to his flock, beseeching:

"Oh, God on high, save us from the discordant beat that only leads to destruction. Give us the vision to see before it is too late."

Complete silence now reigned in the little church. Even the choir had forgotten to relay its Sunday pinching as they all gazed at the enraptured face of their pastor. The congregation hung on his every word.

He raised both arms imploringly as he moved into a path of light streaming through the sacred panes of the window. His upturned face was bathed in an orange glow as he urged:

"Shape thy soul to a crystal ball, and God will concentrate the light."

All through the sermon, Krausmeyer had never taken his eyes off Cyrus Bent.

In the choir room, the voices of the choir trailed into the "Amen" of the recessional. With the last note the room broke into confusion as the boys ripped off surplices and cassocks.

Skippy jumped the steps and travelled toward Waynes', searching for a missing sleeve as he ran. Within sight of the house, he yoo-hooed until Sooky appeared in the window. Still running, he related the experiences of the morning service.

"'N' even when we got in the choir room Mr. Somme never said nothin' to us," informed Skippy, panting, "'Course it weren't our fault—were it, now?"

"Jiminy Christmas! You guys did right!" consoled Sooky.

"Wouldn't you say it was all Somerset's fault?" asked Skippy.

"I'd say it was Somerset if anybody should happen to ask it off'n me!"

"Me too!" agreed Skippy.

"You betcha!" added Sooky.

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Mr. Somme asked him to stay after we left!" Skippy went on.

"Yeh?"

"Say! Whatcha doin' this afternoon?" asked Skippy.

"Nothin'—just stayin' in."

"How about comin' over to my house 'n' stayin' for supper?" suggested Skippy, wondering what his mother would say for daring to offer an invitation without her consent.

"I can't—not today—tomorro' maybe."

"No! Today!" insisted Skippy. "I'm goin' to take these darn things off 'n' get into my old clothes," hoping his mother would consent to justify the lie.

"Wait'll I see! Ma, Skippy says c'n I. . . ?" He returned to the window eagerly: "Yeh, Skippy, you betcha!"

"All right, don't forget! S'long!"

On his way home, Skippy pondered over the best way to prepare his mother for the liberty he had taken. Certainly he could not keep his suit on, now that he had promised to take it off. He wondered if it would spoil the suit if he got just a little tear in it—just enough to necessitate a change of clothes. But with torn clothes he would never be allowed to have a guest to supper. After great thought he decided to lay the matter before his mother, explaining why Sooky had not gone to church. This solution seemed so

simple that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

As Skippy entered his gate, he was hailed by Somerset Gohagen just returning from church.

"What d'ya think—I'm going to be organ pumper. Mr. Somme says I can. Think of it!" shouted Somerset, running toward him.

"That'll give ya good battin' practise," Skippy suggested. "Anyways it'll learn ya how to bunt."

"What's a bunt?"

"Don't you know what a bunt is?" asked Skippy vacantly.

"Oh, a bunt!"

"Certainly," reassured Skippy, swinging on the gate, "Say, won't it be swell when we have lovely uniforms for all the fellers."

"Gee, c'n you imagine."

"An' with stripes down the pants," encouraged Skippy.

"Very elegant," gasped Somerset, "Tst! tst! Simply gorgeous!"

" 'Course mine'll have lots more wide stripes on the pants, 'cause I'm captain," said Skippy.

"Skippy! (Clap! Clap!) Dinner on the table!" called Mr. Skinner.

"Ya know what I was thinking last night?" continued Skippy, unmindful of the interruption, "I was thinking, if we can't get baseball uneeforms, of writing a long letter to Mr. Rockefeller 'n' askin' him to buy us horses. So then we'd be cavalry. That is if each feller'd buy his own uneeform. How d'ya think the bunch'd like horses?"

"Gee! That'd be swell!" The response came from the bottom of Somerset's heart.

"Then I'll write tonight!"

"Yes, but c'n a drum major toss up a stick ridin' on a horse?" asked Somerset.

"Sure! There's nothin' to that! I'll learn ya all those things," reassured Skippy. "Ya know another idea I got? When we get all drilled 'n' everything, let's us turn ourselves over to the army. Then let any country start monkeyin' with 'Old Glory'! Just let 'm! Oohh! C'n you imagine?"

"Skippy! (Clap! Clap!) Dinner on the table! Don't let me call you again."

Skippy had always answered his father's second call, mindful of the threat that followed. Not that he thought his father would hit him. Ten to one he wouldn't. However, in such matters Skippy was no gambler. He swerved and scooted into the house,

leaving Somerset swinging on the gate, shouting, "If we ever have to go to war, Lizzie says she'll make a cake."

When Skippy entered the kitchen his mother was bending down, taking a roast ham out of the oven. Skippy watched her for some time, until Mrs. Skinner glanced up suspiciously.

"Gee, Ma, you certainly can cook, I'll say!"

"Have you been into trouble?" asked Mrs. Skinner.

"Who, me? No, Ma, why?"

"Oh, nothing," returned Mrs. Skinner.

"We'd never be able to eat a ham like that—not a whole ham," said Skippy. "Wouldn't it—shouldn't it—oughtn't we to ask somebody to help us eat it?"

"Certainly not!" said Mrs. Skinner. "This has to do for a couple of days."

"I wouldn't have believed that we could be so selfish—never so much as company, and on Easter too! I might just as well change to my old clothes."

"Of course you will," said his mother, "I want you to take care of that suit."

"Well, Ma, if I change into my old clothes can I have Sooky to supper, because he has old clothes on?"

"I can't see that that makes any difference," argued Mrs. Skinner. "They eat just as much regardless of clothes."

"So my friends ain't good enough to be invited to the house, huh?"

"Oh, yes, son, but some other time; not tonight."

"Well, Ma——?"

"Yes?" questioned Mrs. Skinner.

"I already invited Sooky, and I'm willing to go without my supper to let him come. Nothin' could be fairer than that—could it, now?"

"Well, son, I guess there'll be enough to go around. You can have Sooky come." And Mrs. Skinner carried the roast to the table, as Skippy went to the staircase: "Ho, Pop, (Clap! Clap!) Dinner on the table—waitin'! waitin'!"

CHAPTER IX

SKIPPY stood swinging on the front gate, blowing a whistle continuously and only pausing for an occasional breath. He took this in gulps and exhaled it in a long, incessant trill, maintaining it until little purple cords showed in his throat. After fifteen minutes the first innocent notes assumed the shrillness of a riveter's drill, and neighbors paced their rooms almost frantic.

The Skinner phone rang steadily; a score of neighbors were informed that the line was busy. Receivers were snapped back on hooks, and Skippy was confronted by angry faces peering at him through the windows. A few raised the sashes and called: "Oh, wait till your mother comes home, young man. Oh, you just wait!"

"Call Sheriff Knox, Mrs. Green, I guess he'll put a stop to it," suggested a neighbor across the way.

A man across the street cut himself shaving; he ran to the window, raised it, and attracted the attention

of Skippy by brandishing a razor. Skippy mistook it for a greeting and waved in friendliness, his bulging cheeks causing the little pea to romp merrily within the wall of the whistle.

Jim Lovering, currycombing his horse, listened to the shrillness off in the distance. "Don't sound like consumption to me. No, sir, not by a damn sight."

Krausmeyer, waiting on a customer, neglected to put his hands on the scales. "Ach, that Skippy loafer!" he growled.

Mrs. Barkenteen removed the box of whistles from the counter. "Thank God I only sold one," she said. "Well, these go back today."

Skippy, somewhat dizzy from his exertion, alternated by imitating the junk man.

"Have you any old junk aroun' today? Any old rubber boots? Rubber hose? Any old bottles, old clothes? Haaa-ve yoooo—" He held the long-drawn-out notes, then in tones so swift that the question became one word: "Anyoldjunkaroun'today?"

The hinge wheezed as the gate swung to and fro. Then Skippy burst into song:

"Say-lor bee-ware of—the deeep—of—the —deee-ep da-da-da da—da—deee. Sa—Say-lor—bee-ware—" and from his throat came a low guttural—"Bee-ware."

Taking a breath he broke into a peddler's chant:

"Delaware peet — yez! peet — yez! Bananaws! Bananaws!"

Unable to recall any other street noises he contented himself with the whistle.

Hearing an imitation of a steamer blast, Skippy turned and perceived Ray approaching, swinging an oil can around his head.

"All aboard for Coney Island!" yelled Skippy.

Ray put the oil can on his head and chugged by with a series of gliding shuffles; his arms rotated like side-wheels churning the water. "Chug! Chug! Chug!" warned Ray. "Away to starboard! Make ready for the anchor!"

"Aye! Aye! Aye! Ready!" answered Skippy, leaning forward on the gate to catch the imaginary rope.

As Ray swerved to the gate with an excess of steam throbbing in the boilers, Skippy hopped on board, commanding, "Anchors aweigh!" Grabbing his companion around the waist they marked time for a moment and then, gathering momentum, sailed up the street in a trail of chugging.

"Thank God!" said the man shaving.

"Too—toot—toot—too."

As they steamed away it suddenly occurred to Skippy that they might be a battleship, and he shouted,

"Bing! Bang! Bang! Bang!" With his fist he knocked the oil can off the head of Ray with a loud "Boom!" and then cried: "To the guns, men, we're under fire."

"Smart, ain't cha?" exclaimed Ray. "That's the third time ya did that! If ya wanta be a destroyer, pick out ya own ocean. Look at that can, now." And he picked it up, together with the shattered potato.

"What else are you goin' to get up at Krausmeyer's besides oil?" asked Skippy.

"Nothin'."

"What! No fig Newtons?" Skippy inquired. It seemed incredible.

"No! No fig Newtons!"

"Ah, go ahead get fig Newtons. Ya father won't know the difference—he never looks at the bill!"

"There's too many fig Newtons on the bill already," said Ray.

"Well, I suppose we'll have to be satisfied with five o'clock teas," sighed Skippy.

"No, nothin'!" Ray informed. "Just oil."

They entered Krausmeyer's store, and after a few turns at the coffee grinder Ray surrendered the can for oil. Krausmeyer pumped, but his watchful eye gleamed at them through the lens.

"Mr. Krausmeyer, can I have an apple?" asked Ray.

"No!"

"Not even a wormy apple?" insisted Ray.

"They vas no vormy apples."

"Can I charge an apple then?"

"Vell, that's different—yes."

"Make it two," Ray said.

Skippy picked the biggest from under Ray's hand.

"Want to see how to pitch an outcurve?" Skippy questioned. "Hold it like this and let it go shootin' off the thumb—sorta half underhanded."

"Show us somethin' new."

"All right! I betcha can't pitch an out drop."

"Can too," boasted Ray, and he wound up like a pitcher.

"Wrong!" said Skippy. "Here's the way. Ya have to let the ball come through the thumb and first two fingers. I'll have to show ya the pretty little break I got on an out drop some time."

"I wonder if we'll ever make enough money to buy uneeforms?" Ray asked.

"Well, we can't have a team without uneeforms—that is, a team what is a team," said Skippy.

"Where are we goin' to get them?"

"Maybe we can get up a choir team and the church can take up a collection some Sunday. We could call ourselves the 'All Saints A. C.'" Skippy suggested.

As the boys left the store a man regarded them thoughtfully. He smiled as he ate a sandwich and drank from a bottle of milk.

"What's that boy's name who was showing all the different curves?" he asked.

"Skippy Skinner," answered Krausmeyer.

"And the other?"

"Marlowe—Ray Marlowe."

"Marlowe? Marlowe?" the man repeated. "Don't they own that large house with the adjoining orchard?"

Krausmeyer moved to the front of the store and allowed both eyes to sweep the horizon before he spoke.

"Yes—a nice piece of property," he grunted, and stood rubbing and twisting his hands.

"Hm!"

The man's eyes narrowed as he watched Krausmeyer's bullet-shaped head. He touched the points of a waxed moustache while his eyes bored into the grocer's neck.

"Say, I think I'll have another sandwich," and he stroked a clean-shaven chin as he added: "If you don't mind."

"Sure," agreed Krausmeyer. He studied the steel gray eyes looking through the open door beside him. "Vassn't you used to be here before?"

"Well, yes, I was here once before—but that must

have been eight or ten years ago," replied the man.

Krausmeyer cut the ham and buttered the bread in silence. Clapping it into the sandwich he asked: "Business here?"

"Well. . . Yes and no," returned the other. "By the way, I noticed you were looking over the stock market when I came in. Do any investing?"

"No—o," slowly, still studying the other's face. The grocer's eyes narrowed: "Why?"

"Oh, no reason, but I think you're wise to keep away from it, just the same."

"Yes?"

"Yes," answered the other. "I never meddle with it. Nope." He bit his sandwich, and added in an offhand voice: "But you take real estate, now; that's different. Wouldn't mind putting some money in that myself, if I had the right proposition." He tilted the milk bottle to his lips, and his eyes met the grocer's for a fleeting moment. They instantly took on a faraway look.

Krausmeyer waited for him to continue, but he had lapsed into silence. The grocer squinted at the stranger in his finely-tailored suit; he noticed the clean-cut features in profile. "Vell, that's wise," he said cautiously. "The right proposition."

"But you don't stumble over them every day." The

man spoke absently as he surveyed the town through the doorway, munching a sandwich.

"So?" Krausmeyer thrust his hands in his pockets and cocked his head on one side. "Vait a minute until I put these things on the papa's bill—draw up a chair."

Turning to Marlowe's account, the grocer entered a gallon of oil, a loaf of bread, and a quart of apples. His pen hesitated as he thought of the orchard. Then he rubbed out the entry of apples, and changed it to a dozen oranges.

CHAPTER X

SKIPPY could never quite tell just how it all happened. Perhaps it was her highly-polished face, that reflected the sun with shimmering high lights. Perhaps it was the stiffly-starched dress, giving her the appearance of a rider in a circus. Then again it might have been her dancing dimples playing over a set of white even teeth. At any rate, reason he could not, as he gazed enraptured at the loveliness of Carol Sharon. He was touched with the wand of worship—love.

His love was boundless. It took in her desk, the floor, the school, the Board of Education for building the school, her mother, her father, her father's bicycle —everything, in fact that had to do with the adorable Carol.

When he opened a book thousands of dancing dimples took the place of type. His nose caught the fragrance of cherry blossoms through the open windows, and he imagined her breath on his cheeks. Alarmed by these thoughts, he tried to divert his mind

by fishing through his pockets. He drew forth two priceless glassies—and thought of her wondrous eyes.

After school he saw her home by darting from tree to tree. When she arrived at her door and disappeared within, he sank to the depths of despair. Magnetized by the very house, he lay in the fields opposite, wondering which room was hers. In this position he haloed the house and all the inmates. Even the chickens were properly fitted with haloes. Unsuspecting worms were not immune to the fervor of Skippy's all-embracing love; each wriggling worm received the last rites as he was plucked for burial in the chicken's crop. Little did they realize that they were helping to make the eggs that fed the beautiful Carol. A robin perched on the roof, and by so doing was measured for a halo of the purest gold. All nature sparkled as haloed butterflies and bees flitted around the Sharon home. With haloes enough to equip the universe, Skippy entirely overlooked himself. This was truly love.

Never had Skippy been so happy before; in his gladness he could not refrain from singing: "It's a beautiful day to be glad in, the violets are budding today—" but his voice choked. Overcome with love, "Gee, it's so very beeyootiful, I'd like to give somebody a sock in the jaw."

Getting up, he wandered aimlessly to and fro. With

beating heart he walked past the house, acting as though he were looking for a friend up the street. When in full view of the windows, he put his fingers to his mouth to whistle. To his dismay only a feeble sputter came—and he was the best whistler in town. He continued up the street; coming to the corner he sped around with a great feeling of relief.

Arrested by a card in a barber's window, he slackened his pace and turned to inspect it. It showed every conceivable kind of hair-cut. He gazed with envy at the handsome men with curled moustaches and fancy hair combs. Taken from every angle, there were at least two dozen to select from. However, Skippy sketched them all in his copy book. His eyes rested on one in particular, a man with a beard parted in the middle, topped by the curliest of moustaches; big brown eyes stared from a wealth of sweeping lashes and eyebrows. But the hair—that was the last word in art. A highly-terraced pompadour swept up from the forehead and disappeared in rows of fine curly waves.

"Tst! Tst! That's beeyootiful!" was all Skippy could say.

His heart sank as he thought of his own miserable mop of scraggly yellow hair that ended in a cowlick. Cowlick! His soul sickened at the very crudeness of the word. Why hadn't they called it cowkiss?

With the image of the bearded, curly-pompadoured man as an ideal, Skippy hurried home and immediately went to the bathroom and doused his head in water. Taking a comb, he made a part on the side of his hair. This done, he plastered it down while the water trickled down his neck unnoticed. Then he massaged the smooth surface of each side of the part with a bar of soap. Going into his mother's room, he secured a curling iron, which he heated over a candle. By the use of a comb he raised the side with the most hair and clutched it with curling iron, burning his head many times in the operation. This he disregarded as the vision of his pompadoured ideal loomed brighter in his mind. After many painful scorches with curling iron he finally made some impressions in his soap-sudded locks. By the use of his fingers he pushed the curled side forward until it fluffed out in front. Without removing his fingers, for fear it would fall back in place, he reached for the soap and pressed the end with the cake. When it was removed, the end of the pompadour was firmly gummed to his skull with a lump of soap. The other side was easy. All he had to do was to press his hand over the wet hair and run the comb alongside the little finger. So neatly was this accomplished that it ended in a little horn jutting from his head.

His elaborate toilet completed, Skippy surveyed himself in the mirror and was astounded at the sight of the fluffed pompadour that curled like a Hollander's skate. Immensely pleased, he gave vent to many nods of approval. With the aid of a hand mirror the larger mirror presented many flattering views. While thus engaged, his eye lighted on a bottle of cologne. Taking the bulb he pressed it and let the spray sprinkle over his head until the bottle was half emptied.

"Skippy! (Clap! Clap!) Supper on the table!"

Skippy made a bound for the stairs, then stopped as he thought of his appearance. It would certainly be a surprise to his parents when they saw the finely-curled pompadour. Of course they would doubtless be pleased to see him so excessively neat; but how could he account for the sudden interest? Heretofore he had always disregarded his unruly locks. To destroy the afternoon's work was out of the question; the pompadour was too fine a piece of work for that.

He sauntered along the banisters, trying to muster up enough courage to sail into the dining room, when the voice of his father left no alternative.

"Skippy! (Clap! Clap!) Supper on the table! Don't let me call you again!"

"Comin'! Comin'!" answered Skippy, sliding down the banisters.

As he entered the dining room he felt like a truck-driver applying for work with a cane. He could not meet the eyes of his father and mother. His cheeks burned as he felt the penetrating eyes of his father. Skippy felt so painfully neat and dandified that he was at a loss for words. He moved in jerks and stumbled over the rug. He felt worse than a stranger—and in his own house. Finally, with a supreme effort, he sat down and unfolded his napkin. He stopped as the restraining voice of his father commanded: "Go upstairs and wash that face!"

After supper Skippy paraded to his room, only pausing now and then to pat the crusty surface of his hair. It was stiffening nicely, and it received as much attention as a pit lodged in the cavity of a tooth. He was worried, however, by the prospect of going to bed. To do it up again would require three full hours of uninterrupted study. For a moment he thought of setting the alarm for five in the morning; but it was only a fleeting moment. Such an act would upset the household beyond description. At all costs, it had to be preserved for the next day. But how? That was the problem. If he lay on his back the pillow would rub it out of place. Skippy was sorely troubled. Well, he would have to sit up all night.

Having decided in favor of this, he got out his book,

"Treasure Island." This book Skippy had read many times before, but he preferred reading it again to starting another. He felt that no book could hold him like "Treasure Island." It was the only book he had ever read, and he was satisfied with it. Besides, another story might prove to be a disappointment. Here he knew what to expect, consequently he never read anything else. Many times he had waited at the library, while friends scanned the shelves for something new —even some who had read "Treasure Island." This was something Skippy, himself a great reader, could never understand. At such times he would take "Treasure Island" from the rack and scan the pages carefully. It refreshed him to see different type.

As he sat reading in the chair, the type began to blur and his eyes closed. With an effort he straightened up and started reading in a different place; even so, his lids drooped again and he fell asleep. He awoke with a start as his father's bedroom door slammed, announcing that everybody had retired for the night. He looked at his own bed, so fresh and white. At last he had the solution—he would sleep without a pillow. The problem solved, he undressed, brushed his teeth without water, and knelt down and asked forgiveness for a hurried prayer, promising to go into the matter

at great lengths the following night. Unfinished homework never troubled him.

With the pillow on the floor and the back of his head on the mattress, he fell into a troubled sleep. Barbers were chasing him with scissors and clippers in abundance; through the streets and from classroom to classroom he scurried, but they followed closer and closer. In the nick of time he espied Mr. Sharon's bicycle on the assembly piano. Taking this, he bounded down the stairs and up the road, only to look back and discover that they were also on bicycles and running him down. The next instant he found himself at the Sharon home in a short night shirt. Someone was coming to let him in; embarrassed, he bent down in order to cover himself to the knees. However, he was distinctly conscious of a draft whistling in the rear.

The barbers were now on horseback; all firing pistols. Skippy scooted through the town while cannons and guns burst all around him. He suddenly stopped as a wall hundreds of feet high sprang before him. He was about to be shot. Shots! Shots! where did they all come from?

Skippy opened his eyes and blinked at the flood of sunlight streaming through the window panes. A

dream. Hammers beat far and wide on naked buildings. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. The hammering had now taken the place of his mother's voice, for after eight o'clock the noise was deafening, making sleep impossible.

Yawning, he caressed the stiffened pompadour. It was unrumpled and as stiff as frozen glue. He collected his thoughts. School! Carol! He was up and dressing feverishly.

Skippy entered the kitchen fully dressed, rubbing his hands together.

"Well, upon my word!" was all the surprised mother could say.

"Let's have some breakfast, what say, Mom?" cried Skippy, as he hustled to the table.

For once in his life, Skippy waited for breakfast. He kept up an incessant tattoo with his knife and fork, only stopping when his mother placed a steaming plate of buckwheat cakes before him. The next five minutes were taken up with the clinks of a scooping fork, closely followed by hurried gulps and gurgles. The meal finished, Skippy ascended the stairs two at a time and made for the largest mirror.

First he licked the molasses from his mouth, then breathed long and hard on a horseshoe scarfpin of rhinestones before polishing it with his coat sleeve.

After many pricks with the pin he managed to fasten it in the proper place. As a final touch he placed a match behind his ear and surveyed himself with swelling pride. His primping was completed. He gathered his books and hat; in order to set the latter at the right angle, he tilted it until the brim set vertically, causing it to dangle from the back of his head. Skippy lost no further time; conscious of his wobbling hat, he tiptoed down to the door, opened it, and turned: "Bye, Mom, see ya some more!"

"Good-bye, son," answered his mother. "Did you finish your homework?"

The door closed. Sometimes Skippy was hard of hearing.

When he arrived in the schoolyard he hung over a group playing marbles. They looked up, and Skippy seized the opportunity by remarking, "Well, what d'ye think of it?"

"I'll tell ya what I think of it!" fumed Ray. "Inchin'! That's what he was! He heard me yell knuckle down tight!"

"Didn't neither!" stoutly maintained Sooky.

"Ah! Who's talkin' about marbles!" cried Skippy peevishly. "It's my hair I'm talkin' about!"

"Did ya get it cut?" asked Somerset.

"No, I didn't get it cut!" replied Skippy, screwing up his nose in a mimicking whine.

"Then what did ya get it?" they asked in chorus.

Skippy too disgusted to reply, went to the classroom. As he entered the building he was greeted by Gussie Krausmeyer, the only pupil in the room.

"Oh! What a beautiful hair comb!" cooed Gussie, clasping her hands in a worshipping gesture as if to emphasize the remark.

"Yeah?" Skippy mumbled.

"It makes you look pretty and—" She stopped short as Carol Sharon entered with a swish, and noted swiftly the longing glance that Skippy cast in Carol's direction. For a moment Gussie continued to regard him wistfully, then ducked behind her geography to hide the welling tears.

Skippy pretended to be greatly interested in some problem, and poised a pointless pencil over a sheet of paper. His head rested on his hand, the better to cast a sidelong glance at Carol, seated three rows to his right. Despite the fact that she fumbled with a pencil box he prayed for an approving glance; with thumping heart he hoped and waited. She seemed unaware of his very presence. Feeling that the bell would soon ring, Skippy inquired of the empty desks, "What was that last problem in the home work?"

He waited for the answer with beating heart, then Gussie answered, "If A buys a peck of potatoes for $1.50 and B——"

"Oh, yes! I remember now!" interrupted Skippy, vainly trying to hide his annoyance. He noticed that Carol had never even paused in her task. While he sat brooding, he was aroused by a tiny sneeze.

"Excuse me!" Carol whispered, peering into the pencil box.

"Why, certainly! CERTAINLY!" reassured Skippy, all aglow, so happy to be of service that he could hardly refrain from whistling. He was about to give some medical advice when the appearance of half a dozen pupils smothered the thought.

After school Skippy felt that he simply had to confide in someone. His first thought was of Ray; but for some unaccountable reason Ray had kept out of his way for the past week. Nevertheless, as he spotted the figure of his friend walking home alone, he called to him. In a few minutes he was at his side. Ray continued walking in silence. In awkward embarrassment, Skippy plucked blades of grass and spiralled them around his finger, hoping for an opportunity to introduce the topic.

"Certainly is beeyootiful, ain't she?" sighed Skippy, breaking the ice.

"Just lovely!" chimed Ray.

Least of all had Skippy suspected such wholehearted approval, and he eyed his friend suspiciously, for a moment. Reassured, he continued: "And such pretty eyes!"

"You betcha!" was the hearty response.

"And such nice black hair!" cried Skippy.

"Gold hair!" corrected Ray.

"Black hair!" maintained Skippy.

"I'm tellin' ya Jennie has gold hair!"

"Jennie! Who's talkin' about Jennie! I mean Carol," said Skippy.

"Oh, her!" shrugged Ray with an air of dismissal.

"Yes, HER! What's the matter with HER?" flared Skippy, assuming for the first time a menacing attitude toward his friend.

"I wasn't givin' her the coo-coo, Skip," replied, Ray, more in kindness than fear.

"Jennie's dippy over you," said Skippy, touched by his friend's warmth and feeling that a white lie was pardonable under the circumstances.

"What did she say?" gulped Ray.

"Well, she didn't say nothin'; that is, exackly, only I have a way o' knowin'," and Skippy's eyes narrowed with suppressed wisdom.

This morsel seemed to satisfy Ray, who rattled his marbles as he hummed, "Ben Bolt."

"She—that is, Carol—she didn't say nothin', I don't suppose," nibbled Skippy. "About me, I mean?"

"Not s'much as one little word!"

Skippy would have given the world and the stars thrown in to take back his compliment, but it was too late. Ray went on: "She only had two words with me in all her life."

"What was them?" asked Skippy.

"Monkey face!"

Skippy decided to keep the world and the stars.

They were in front of the barber shop. In a burst of good will Skippy steered his companion over to the poster. "Pick out anything ya want," he offered, "an' I'll do it up for ya!"

Overwhelmed with his friend's generosity Ray pointed to design W. It was a style dear to the hearts of bar-tenders. Skippy withdrew the sketch of it from his pocket and studied it sadly. "I was goin' to use that myself, but now you can have it."

CHAPTER XI

"Gee! I don't see how I can horn in on Freddie's party without bringin' a present," muttered Skippy, wending his way slowly but surely toward Freddie's house. "Suppose he makes some dizzy crack about it at the table!"

The thought stopped him. Thrusting out his chin and squinting one eye, he struck a pose familiar to followers of the ring. He evidently reached a decision in very short order, for he continued, "Well, supposin' he does!"

Although he continued in the direction of the party, the matter was by no means dropped. His lips twitched with muttered threats. Perhaps tortured by some imaginary insult, Skippy flung his hat to the ground and pranced hither and thither, delivering the most devastating jabs, hooks, and upper-cuts to his supposed enemy's ribs and face. Knowing that gameness and human endurance can only stand so much, he sent over his favorite jab, more from mercy than anything else. In all fairness let it be said of Skippy that he could

not bear the sight of an enemy oozing away in a pool of blood; therefore, it was only human that he should stoop down and use his hat to fan his victim back to consciousness. This accomplished after many minutes, Skippy continued in the direction of the party, whistling.

The home of Freddie was the typical residence of a man who submerged his family with a thirty-dollar-a-week envelope. The house grudgingly allowed a lawn to flourish twenty feet in back of the sidewalk. In the minute center of this a ring of white-washed clam shells circled the base of a jointed iron-piped flag pole, which soared as high as the second story of the house, leaving an unrestricted view of a row of maple trees from the attic window.

The invitation announced the time of the party for three o'clock, so at a quarter to two Skippy hopped across the porch. The bell was no sooner buzzed than the head of the anxious host appeared. His glance beheld a pair of empty hands. He then looked up and noticed the first guest. Skippy parried the look and edged into the house.

"Listen, Freddie!" he began, "I don't want ya to think Mamma forgot ya, 'cause she didn't, but just as soon as she goes down town, she's goin' to get ya somethin' awful nice."

With this weight off his mind, Skippy sought the sofa and found that the springs worked perfectly. The host remained at his post with his hand on the door-knob, and presently was repaid by another ring from the bell. By straining his ears, Skippy caught the confident tones of Sooky:

"No! No! We ain't forgot ya, Freddie. Just as soon as Mamma goes down town she's goin' to get ya somethin' swell. I'm not goin' to tell what it is, 'cause I want it to be a surprise."

Skippy straightened up with a smile, feeling that the party was already beginning to be a success.

The third guest arrived out of breath, but in breezy tones called out: "Well, Freddie! I suppose you think we forgot ya—didn't cha? Well, we didn't! No, sir! Fact is, Mamma's goin' down town 'n' what she ain't goin' to get you! Oh, boy! Listen, Freddie, I ain't kiddin' this time!" And thus relieved, Ray Marlowe entered the parlor.

As the two other guests made room for him on the sofa, they were interrupted by the arrival of another boy. To their disgust, this newcomer handed the host a package. Skippy saw his friends color at this bit of bad taste. "Aw! Why shouldn't he bring a book," he whispered. "His old man's principal of the Public School."

The logic of this remark had a soothing effect. So much so, in fact, that even the apologetic smile of the giver was uncalled for. He was considered one of them.

In fifteen minutes everybody was present, even some of the guests' visiting cousins, and presents filled the table. It took Freddie a good five minutes to check and re-check, until they nearly tallied with the guests.

The guests hung over Freddie in awkward groups and seemed determined to locate the missing gifts, but Skippy swung into their midst and exclaimed, "Let's play Post Office!"

"Oh! We're going to play Post Office! We're going to play Post Office!" shrieked Gussie Krausmeyer, hustling and rustling among the groups in joyful anticipation.

Seeing the eager glances that Gussie directed at him, Skippy shouted, "I'm goin' to be postman!"

Willie Simpson, with a face like a half-cooked pie and sorely in need of a hair-cut, scurried out into the hall, crying, "I'm goin' to be it!"

Skippy took his place in front of the drawn curtain and listened to Willie's muffled message.

"A letter for Evelyn Gilmore," announced Skippy. "Evelyn, there's a letter for ya!"

"I don't want a letter!" pouted pretty Evelyn.

"She says she doesn't want it!" said Skippy, poking his head through the curtain.

"Bzzz?" whispered Willie.

Skippy turned and looked over the assembled guests. "Yes, she's here!"

"Ask her——?"

"All right! I'll see what I can do," said the Postmaster. "Fifty letters for Patricia!"

"I don't care to play Post Office!" sniffed Patricia.

"She don't want them, either!" informed Skippy.

"Ya got—" and the rest was lost in a whisper.

"I'm tellin' ya she don't want them! Why don't ya try—?" and Skippy whispered into the other's ear.

"No, try—" advised Willie in a trail of whispers.

"Oh, don't be foolish! Well, all right! I'll try!" He turned around and announced: "Two thousand letters for Bessie Jones!"

"Mother doesn't allow me to play Post Office!" replied Bessie.

"Hear that? Now are ya satisfied?"

"How about—" asked the other.

"Oh, I think ya better come inside—you're only holding up the party!"

"After me—," and Willie gave vent to a series of indignant whispers.

"Well, what if ya did bring a present? That's got

nothin' whatsoever to do with it!" After this retort, Skippy surrendering his post sat down in disgust.

A lull followed. All eyes were centered on the heavy plush curtains that hung in motionless folds. The stillness was only broken by the trilling of a canary in some distant part of the house. This was smothered as the mantel-piece clock tinkled the hour of three. With the last tinkle Willie emerged from the folds of the curtain. "Well, folks! Let's play something else for a change," he exclaimed. "I never cared for this game anyhow!"

"I know!" tittered Gussie. "Let's play 'Kiss the Pillow!' "

Meantime Skippy, seized with an unquenchable thirst, started on an excursion to the kitchen. He was soon followed by a scrambling, tussling mob of boys. A line formed to the sink, parallel with a kitchen table laden with nut cakes, layer cakes, cup cakes, candies, and snappers. Parched throats were soon forgotten as the crowd pressed around the table gaping at the promised feast.

"If they have two sittin's there'll never be enough to go 'round!" someone remarked.

"They's not enough to go 'round anyway!" moaned Sooky.

"They'd have to do some pretty tall explaining if

they ask me to wait for a second sittin'!" threatened Ray.

"They've got everybody's ironing board, so they shouldn't oughter be pullin' that stuff!" suggested Barrelhead.

"Oh! There's a nut that's droppin' off!" remarked Skippy, reaching for the choice little morsel.

"Ugh! uh! Mustn't be pickin' off the nuts!"

The crowd wheeled as one and beheld Freddie peeking through the crack of the door. He entered the room determinedly, and showed no signs of leaving until the thirst of the guests had been properly quenched. Skippy and his pals guzzled and sputtered three glasses each before they filed back to the party, Freddie grimly following his dejected guests. Skippy drew Ray aside.

"She ain't here," Skippy said.

"She wasn't asked," replied Ray. "Jennie an' Freddie ain't speakin'."

"Not Jennie—Carol, I mean."

"Oh," and Ray turned away.

"Now, children, I haven't been able to go down town lately," announced Mrs. Hopkins, "so there will be no ice cream. The 'phone has been out of order, but I have some lovely lemonade."

Ray and Skippy stared at each other in blank amazement, and swiftly ran to the parlor.

Skippy nudged his companions. With knitted brows and protruding underlip, he mimicked, " 'Mustn't be pickin' off the nuts!' Look at that rinsed-out toad countin' his presents again! Just disgustful, that's what it is!"

"Let's us think up some insults 'n' pick a fight with him!" suggested Sooky.

"He's awful touchy about the time Mr. McGuiness gave his old man a black eye. We might bring that up. . . . No, I got it!" contributed Ray, "the time they had the pianner took away."

"Oh, I dunno, fellers! His pop's been awful good to me—gave me a cent once," interposed Sooky.

"I don't like to make insults anyway!" cried Ray. "I'll just sock him in the nose and let it go at that!"

"Sure, that's better!" agreed Sooky.

Meanwhile Skippy's eyes burned into the nape of the host's neck as he was in the act of checking up his presents for the twentieth time.

" 'Mustn't be pickin' off the nuts!' " Skippy dropped the words on teeth clicks.

The conversation of the boys was brought to a sudden end by the opening of the parlor doors. This was

followed by a chorus of "Ahs!" as the eager faces reflected the flickering candlelight from the birthday cakes placed at each end of a well-filled table.

Each girl and boy were then paired off with the very ones they disliked, and marched into the room to a tune which Mrs. Hopkins played on the piano. After walking around and knocking over an abundance of bric-a-brac, the guests were finally seated amid shrieks of merriment. This ceased instantly when the cakes were served. For the next half hour cheeks bulged with pastry. The stuffing only subsided when neighbors began to arrive with the approaching darkness, intent on dragging home their unwilling offspring.

Skippy hung around after the other guests had departed; but when reasonably certain that favors were not to be given out, started for the door. He had just put on his hat when he was stopped by Mrs. Hopkins. "Skippy," she called, "Ada's mother did not come for her. Will you take her home, like a good boy?"

He waited, expecting Mrs. Hopkins to add: "—and I will give you some nice cakes to take home." However, realizing that she intended to say nothing of the sort, he broke the silence with a sullen, "Yes'm!"

Ada's appearance put an end to the conversation. Skippy found that she was rather easy to look at. Her

face, to be sure, was more wholesome than beautiful. Still, she had jet black hair.

"Oh, Mrs. Hopkins, I had such a lovely time! It was a wonderful party," said Ada.

"Did you have a good time, Skippy?" inquired Mrs. Hopkins.

"Oh, yes'm!" replied Skippy; but he secretly muttered things under his breath about the absence of ice cream. Since Ada seemed intent on talking about the success of the party to Mrs. Hopkins, Skippy put a stop to that at once: "Let's go!"

When they were well out on the road Ada broke the silence: "It must be very nice for you folks who live right in town."

"Huh?" asked Skippy, startled. With quivering lips he inquired, "Just where is it that you live?"

"We live at the Anderson farm."

"The Anderson farm!" moaned Skippy inwardly.

This was past the haunted house, the very last home on the Rockaway Road. Surely the party had been bad enough, but this—unbelievable! Perhaps he was in a nightmare. He pinched himself to make sure that he was not asleep. No! He was wide awake. Awake, and on his way to the Anderson farm at night.

Could it be possible that God in Heaven would allow such a thing to come to pass? Surely no just

God would act like this after he had prayed every night and during thunder storms religiously. Certainly God would have to do some pretty tall explaining to account for this act. He began to rehearse his prayer in choking whispers: "Dear God, well thou knowest this is a raw deal! S'help me if it ain't 'n' after all the singin' I do of a Sunday. Oh! please G——"

"You have an awful lot of lights in town, haven't you?" cried Ada, taking in the few scattered stores.

"W-Why a-ain't there a-any l-li-lights where you live?" asked Skippy, feeling creepy all over. He had never seen the Anderson farm at night. Had he thought of it, even in bed, he would have put his head under the covers.

"We don't need light. You mustn't forget there's starlight."

"Starlight!" Skippy half shouted, "I don't call that light!"

Ada explained the advantages of starlight by relating how Indians crept through the forests at night, to say nothing of wolves, lions, and tigers.

Skippy continued to walk in silence. This girl's conversation was growing insufferable. He would have ground his teeth in rage, but they were chattering beyond control. Nevertheless, he decided it was time for him to take matters in hand. He exclaimed suddenly

in tones loud enough for an echo: "I'D LIKE TO SEE ANY INDIANS OR ROBBERS OR ANYBODY ELSE GET THE BEST OF ME AT NIGHT! I ALWAYS CARRY MY FATHER'S BIG SIX-SHOOTER REVOLVER WITH ME 'N' NOBODY CAN GET FUNNY WITH ME, I BETCHA!"

"Oh! Please don't shout in my ear like that!"

"ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT!" howled Skippy, drawing a box of matches from his pocket. He struck one and held it before him with trembling fingers. "Might as well see where we're goin'," he blustered. "YA-HOO, WOW!"

It was not until he had used up a whole box of matches that he became aware of the fact that he had burned his fingers.

"It's on the other side of this cemetery," reassured the girl.

Skippy had been so busy lighting matches and thinking of the lonely road to the Anderson farm that he had entirely forgotten the cemetery. Speechless with fright, he gazed at the uneven rows of ghost-like slabs, dimly visible in the uncanny light of the stars.

"J-j-just on the other s-side? Oh, well! Then you know the rest of the way—Good night!" and Skippy wheeled and sped back toward town, leaving Ada staring after him.

As he sped past the tall pines swaying in the cold

night air, he swerved into a gully, tripping over stones as he fled. Jutting brambles scratched his face like robbers' daggers; trunk after trunk took the form of crouching kidnappers armed with clubs. As he was about to collapse in terror, a gleam of hope entered his heart. The dim lights of the village beckoned ahead. Speeding nearer the town, he heard the voice of his father calling: "Skip-py! (Clap! Clap!) Supper on the table!"

The sound of the most welcome voice in the world gave Skippy heart enough for another spurt. He had gotten his second wind, and taking advantage of this he finished in a sprint. When he was within a stone's throw of the house, his father called again: "Skip-py! (Clap! Clap!) Supper on the table!"

"All right, Pop! I'm comin'! I'm comin'!"

"Hurry and wash your face and hands—supper's ready."

"Oh, wait'll I tell ya, Pop, wait'll I tell ya!"

"Wash first!"

During the meal Skippy related the adventure. "Ya see, I wouldn't have cared if they had ice cream, but they didn't, just lemonade. An' then to have to go all the way to the Anderson farm at night. . . ."

"Pass your plate, son," said Mrs. Skinner.

"Yes, sir! at night, an' it's no make-believe down

there—no sir! Not a bit of it! It's plain black night!" Skippy paused for the effect, but his parents ate in silence. "I guess bravery doesn't mean a thing in some houses," caustically, "but I betcha if Barrelhead did it his father'd never quit talking about it."

Skippy glowered at the mental picture of Barrelhead weighted down with solid gold medals.

"I'd rather not have you prowling around those lonely woods at night, son," warned Mr. Skinner.

"Say, Pop, I got an idea!" said Skippy suddenly. "Let's get all the men in Morrisville together an' rout out them robbers."

"I heard that property had been sold," Mr. Skinner informed, "and I think the robbers go with it."

"Has it been sold, George?" asked Mrs. Skinner.

"So Fred tells me—he was talking about it, going down on the train this morning. We didn't see what advantage there was in it, except for farming. It's too far from the station to be practical—"

"Jim Lovering says everything's—"

"Your father's talking," corrected the mother. "You know, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Krausmeyer had a finger in it."

"Well maybe, but I hear it's a man from the city."

"That's odd. I was sure I saw that man yesterday that used to come around when we employed Cora—

only he has a little moustache now. I wonder if it could be the same man?"

"Possibly," answered Mr. Skinner. "Do you ever hear anything of Cora?"

"Not a word."

"Hm! I guess Jim never quite got over that blow. It was too bad."

"L-i-t-t-l-e p-i-t-c-h-e-r-s h-a-v-e b-i-g e-a-r-s," cautioned Mrs. Skinner, as she noticed Skippy listening to the conversation open-mouthed.

" 'Little pitchers have big ears'," said Skippy. "I ain't to be took in by spellin'. Anyway I don't repeat things outside—not any more." He shook his head sagely. "I know who Cora was—she was my nurse, an' she ran away on some train with a man an' never come back."

"Cora left—I had to let her go," said Mrs. Skinner.

"Did ya pay her?" Skippy asked.

"Is your home work finished?" inquired the father.

"No, sir, them woods is no place to be lost in at night—no, indeed!"

"Did you hear your father ask a question?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" queried Mrs. Skinner.

"Yes, mother."

"Is it finished?"

"Yes, sir, that is 'ceptin' 'Rithmetic, History an' Geography—"

"Better get at it and I will look it over in the morning."

"Do as Papa says. Good night," and the mother puckered her lips for a kiss.

Skippy plunged into Arithmetic by tolling off the fingers of his hand.

"Good night, dear," prompted Mrs. Skinner.

"Night!" and Skippy moved away.

"Kiss mother good night," advised his father.

"Good night!" and Skippy pecked her on the cheek.

"Dear," urged the mother.

"Dear," gulped Skippy, conscious of his father's gaze.

"Good night, son," said Mr. Skinner.

"Night!"

"Papa, de—" began Mrs. Skinner, but catching her husband's eye she started scraping the dishes.

Skippy clumped up the stairs and called, "Good night, papa dear."

"Good night, son."

"If ya wanta raise a cheer in this house ya got to wear hair ribbons, yes sir! Girl's hair ribbons," and Skippy departed to his room.

Mr. Skinner picked up the paper and smilingly turned to the sporting sheet.

CHAPTER XII

THE following afternoon, Ray sat in his room facing a mirror. Skippy tied the arms of an undershirt around his neck and assumed a pompous attitude toward his friend.

"If this administration continues, the country'll go to the dogs."

"Huh?"

"What are we payin' taxes for I'd like to know?" and Skippy scowled at the sketch he held in his hand. "Yes, Mr. Marlowe, they's goin' to be some radishal changes or I'll miss my guess. Shampoo?"

"Aw, shut up!"

"You're next, Mr. Sharon," and Skippy swabbed the sitter's head with a dripping sponge.

"Where do ya think ya are—Niagara Falls?"

It took a full hour of hard labor on Skippy's part before he could do the least thing with the sitter's cowlick. He leaned on it with all his strength, only to see it bob up more invincible than ever. In spite of the fact that the rest of the hair was gummed in lumps of soap, so tightly that fingerprints gave evi-

dence of the pressure brought to bear on it, the cowlick insisted upon sitting erect. As Skippy was about to give up in discouragement, his eyes lit upon a pair of scissors on the bed. He tiptoed across the room.

Meantime the watchful eyes in the mirror were studying every move. As his hands closed on them, Skippy was startled by a warning voice: "Oh—uh! mustn't be takin' the scissors!"

"What scissors?" asked Skippy, quickly covering them with his other hand and looking up blankly, as if he expected to see them dangling from a hook on the ceiling.

The relentless eyes in the mirror never swerved: "You know what scissors!"

"I got a better idea th'n scissors—oh, a swell idea!" exclaimed Skippy. "Just wait here 'n' don't move till I come back!"

"I won't move," said Ray, getting up to hide the scissors.

In a few minutes Skippy returned, weighted with a huge flatiron.

"What's the flatiron for?" inquired Ray. "First ya go out as a barber, now ya come back as a tailor. Make up ya mind."

Skippy pressed the flatiron on the other's head until he sprawled in the chair. Looking in the mirror

he remarked: "Ya look like one of them revolution soldiers with a three cornered hat."

"Feels like a cannon ball!"

"Now let that little hair show fight," and Skippy lifted the flatiron. "He's down to stay."

It was now but the work of a second to run the comb along the sides of the head, and after Skippy as a finishing touch had sharpened the two little horns that stuck out in the rear, by twirling them between soapy thumb and forefinger, the enthusiasm of Ray knew no bounds. He could not take his eyes off the mirror. Wave after wave of self-admiration swept over him. He had fallen in love with his own image. Jennie herself began to be a thing of the past. He even belittled her memory. With every fresh squirt of cologne, Ray felt that he was meant for the stage, or to stand on corners and insult people.

"Now, if we could only get some candy to take to their houses on Saturday," broke in Skippy, "maybe they would love us back."

"Ain't hair combs like this enough?"

"No, they ain't enough!" said Skippy in a hollow voice; and, with the wisdom that only springs from suffering, he added, "It's money and gifts; yes, sir, gifts—candy, peanuts—"

"What's a candy or a peanut, huh," shrugged Ray.

"Not *A* candy or *A* peanut!" said Skippy, with suppressed scorn. "Hundreds, thousands—a quarter's worth, no less!"

"Gee!" protested Ray; but soothed by his reflection he continued, "I might as well go on with it, I got me hair combed."

"Oh, love's beautiful!" exclaimed Skippy, dreamily, "Makes ya cry inside an' laugh outside, until ya think ya got a rainbow in ya."

"Gee! Ya mean—?"

"D' ya wanta know what love is? I'll tell ya; take me to the circus an' bring out the very veriest funny clown, an' I'll bust out cryin' in his face. Yes, sir!"

"Not the funniest clown?"

"'N' that ain't all," went on Skippy, ignoring the interruption. "I'd put my coat in the mud 'n' let Carol walk over it."

"Ya pants, too?" trembled Ray, frightened at the very vision.

"Aw, what d'ya think! No, but I tell ya what I *would* do. I'd get down and drink mud puddle slops to make Carol happy!"

"If you can, so can I!" agreed Ray, warmed by love's awakening.

"Not out of my mud puddle, ya can't!" Skippy returned hotly.

"If Jennie is along, I can't drink outa your mud puddle?"

"Oh, if Jennie is along, sure!" conceded Skippy, anxious for a foursome.

"'N' even if she wasn't, I could!" Ray bristled.

"Keep the mud puddle—be selfish!"

"Oh, I guess I can always dig up me own little mud puddle. Jennie 'n' me don't have to take off'n nobody!" replied Ray.

"Say, speakin' of mud puddles gives me an idea!" beamed Skippy. "I know how we can make money—wash Jim Lovering's milk bottles 'n' get ten cents each of us."

"Sure, Mike, let's go over."

When the boys entered the barn Jim Lovering was unhitching Bess in the stall. Glancing over the horse's neck he beheld the two in earnest conversation.

"Ask him!" Ray prompted.

"You ask him!" replied Skippy, his foot gliding back and forth over the splinterless planks.

"Scared, ain't cha!" said Ray, polishing a worn nail with the ball of his foot.

"'Lo, Jim!" shouted Skippy, with a belittling glance at his companion. "Say, Jim, c'n we wash some milk bottles 'n' make ten cents—for each of us, I mean?"

Jim Lovering was without a hired man and needed

help sorely; yet he stroked his stubbled chin as if in doubt, enjoying the effect. As he sucked at a corner tooth he thought of the many times they had helped him deliver milk for the express privilege of riding with one foot on the three-by-four step. Breaking the silence at last, Jim drawled: "Well, they's a mess of 'em back there 'n' the sooner the better."

" 'N' ya mean ya'll give us ten cents each?" Skippy inquired.

"I said they's a mess of 'em back there 'n' the sooner the better—get over there, Bess, before I break every bone in yer ornery neck!" said Jim, caressing the prancing mare.

"You betcha, Jim!" yelled Skippy, and both boys scooted to the milkhouse.

"Now I wonder what they're up to, comin' round wheedlin' for money. Hm!" Jim reflected, "oncst they git mixin' with them five-hundred-dollar-millionaires that's bound to come here, they'll make these kids think a dime's the head of a pin!" He scowled at the sound of the hammer's beat, then spit in the manure. "Maybe this town'll wake up, but then it'll be too late. —Get over there, Bess! I'll have to trade you off, ya old nanny goat!" and Jim filled a bucket with a generous supply of oats.

Out in the milkhouse, Skippy and Ray were work-

ing. The huge tub of hot soapy water held Skippy entranced. He thrust every bottle to the very bottom, wetting his cuffs with each dip. He withdrew it gradually and observed the ring of foam. The glubble-ubble-ubble-ubble-ubble of the upturned bottle soothed his ears.

"I'm watchin' ya," observed Ray, waiting to rinse. "Playin' soda fountain, that's what ya was."

"Betcha there's every bit of a thousand vanilla sodas in here," apologized Skippy, conscious that his soul was being bared for scrutiny.

"Let me wash," pleaded Ray. "All your fingers look like little white prunes 'n' I ain't even got one little wrinkle."

"Why didn't ya say so," Skippy answered, open-eyed. "Gee, how should I know ya wanted wrinkles."

"I was just wonderin'," Ray hesitated, as he watched his friend skim the fluffy foam into a ball.

"Ya was wonderin'—wonderin' what!" replied Skippy, scooping a larger ball of shimmering foam.

"Well," said Ray, "I was wonderin' how I'd look with a face full of wrinkles."

The words were no sooner uttered than Skippy swung and plopped Ray with the suds.

"Tryin' to get me—get me roused up, ain't cha!" howled Ray, one eye glowering through a tunnel of

foam. At the sight of his partner, doubled in mirth, he reached in the rinsing tub and his hands closed on an upright bottle. With a swash, he sprayed a wide fan of grey water. Skippy straightened, dripping from head to foot.

"C-can't t-take a j-joke, c-can ya!" stuttered Skippy.

Jim Lovering fumbled at the lock of the barn door, while the pesky Bess whinnied and stamped in the stall. He paused outside and wondered if he had hung up the harness. To satisfy himself, he peered through the window once more. Reassured that Bess was comfortable for the night, he repaired to the milkhouse.

"You kids break any o' my bottles?" said Jim, poking his head in the door.

"Not one little teeny bottle, Jim," consoled Skippy. He turned to his partner. "We got 'em all done, ain't we, Ray?"

"Yap!"

"Bet they's milk streaks all over 'em," growled Jim, He fished in his pocket and flipped a quarter. "Tain't worth it, but I ain't got no small change."

"Gee, a quarter, no less!" cried Skippy, spinning into a run as he caught it, and calling over his shoulder: "Thanks, Jim."

"Me too, Jim," Ray chimed, fearing to turn lest he lose sight of the treasurer.

"Say, do ya know what I was thinkin', Ray?" panted Skippy, jogging alongside his friend.

"What?"

"Suppose we match for the quarter, then maybe Jennie'll get a quarter's worth o' candy," and as an afterthought Skippy added, "or Carol."

"Oh, gee! I ain't got nerve enough," said Ray in alarm. "If I lose, I mean."

"But maybe ya won't lose," encouraged Skippy.

"I mayn't," was the slow response. "And then again maybe I may."

"Not much chance if it's two outta three," persisted Skippy.

"Oh, I dunno, I dunno," Ray answered dubiously.

"Well, now, stop a minute," said Skippy, halting. "We'll try it once and see how it goes—what d' ya say?"

"Heads!" exclaimed Ray; and as he watched his partner flip the coin in the air he hurriedly added: "No—tails!"

"Well, what is it, heads or tails?" asked Skippy, covering the coin.

"What do you say?" parried Ray.

"I'm askin' you," answered Skippy.

"Eena meena mina mo, catch a nigger by the toe, if he hollers let him go, eena-meena-mina-mo—heads."

Skippy uncovered the coin, and both cried in unison: "Heads."

"Maybe I guess you're right," said Skippy. "After all, it *is* a chance."

"Ain't ya goin' to play any more?" Ray inquired. "I think it's fun."

"Oh, I dunno," Skippy spoke slowly. "One of us is only goin' to be bad friends," and he continued: "Is a couple o' canaries worth that?"

"No, they ain't," agreed Ray.

"Shake!" said Skippy, touched. And as each held the other's hand in solemn compact, Skippy mumbled, "Say, what are we standin' here for—let's go."

Two perspiring boys stood before Mrs. Barkenteen's candy store, surveying the jars of sugary pink and white candies resting in heaps of gray cotton. Sprinkled about the window were various types of little Santa Clauses. Although it was the beginning of May, Mrs. Barkenteen maintained her Christmas display until late. During the week before Christmas, she would tear around and put things in order for the new season.

Hearing the ding-a-ling bell, and seeing the boys enter, Mrs. Barkenteen removed all loose trays of candy and waited for a possible purchase.

The slow process began. As the pair moved along the case, their eyes fixed on the contents, the eyes

of Mrs. Barkenteen travelled to the butter-and-egg man who was having a heated discussion with someone behind closed shutters of the house opposite. The man withdrew at length with a bill and a full basket, and the storekeeper turned to the pair, who were again starting from the beginning of the case.

"Come! Come!" she prompted, "I'm up to my neck in work. What's it goin' to be?"

"How much is these?" asked Skippy, pointing to some chicken corn.

"Cupful for a cent."

"Why, Mrs. Barkenteen!"

"Cupful for a cent."

"Mr. Dusenberry gives two cupfuls for a cent."

"Then why don't cha deal off'n Mr. Dusenberry's!"

"What d'ya say, Ray, should we get them?"

"Let's."

"We'll take twenty-five cents' worth, Mrs. Barkenteen," ordered Skippy.

"Here! No funny work—let's see the quarter."

Skippy produced the quarter and Mrs. Barkenteen fingered every notch, and bit the coin. Still suspicious, she clinked it on a marble slab; but it gave such a series of merry little rings that all doubts were removed.

"Well now, do you think you boys will be promoted?" she inquired affably, still stunned with the idea of dishing out twenty-five cents' worth of chicken feed in one bag.

Skippy and Ray were too intent on the count to reply.

After they had gone her face was wreathed in such smiles of prosperity that she showed her one gold tooth to advantage. This was the nearest thing to jewelry the poor soul possessed.

"We shoulda had her put them in two bags," suggested Ray.

"Ya know why I did that?" answered Skippy. Because it ain't perlite to give a lady a bag of candy."

"It's a lot cleaner than countin' them out with fuzzes from the pocket," rejoined Ray.

"No, I mean boxes," corrected Skippy. "You have to give them in boxes. Let's get some boxes outa your attic—you got piles of 'em."

"That's an idea!" and Ray spurted for home, followed by Skippy.

Arriving at the attic, they shuffled among a lot of boxes. After considerable discussion Ray selected one —a round hat box. Into this he emptied half the little candies, and to his surprise, they came nowhere

near covering the bottom. He looked over at Skippy, still searching among the boxes, and quickly dumped in an extra measure.

"Here! Here! None o' that!" called Skippy. "I'm watchin' ya. Besides, if ya bring that she'll think you're movin' over. Ya got to get a smaller box."

When they had dug out two boxes that were smaller, Skippy took charge of the most delicate part of the transaction. "Two to you and two to me," he counted, "two to you and two to me, two to you and two to me, two to me—"

"I'm wise! Let me count, 'n' stop eatin' 'em."

The sun was well in the west when Skippy wandered toward home with his box of rattling corn. So happy was his frame of mind that he tossed it up and down, up and down until the cover loosened and sprayed a muddy patch of earth with the tiny candies.

Dismayed, he bent down to pick them up. They were speckled with spattered mud. Taking his handkerchief, he wiped each one to a polish before returning to the box. During this process Barrelhead approached.

"Is that candy?" he inquired.

"Yap!"

"Who for?"

"Oh—someone."

"It's for a girl, ain't it?"

"A g-girl?"

"I know it's for a girl, ain't it, now?"

"Y-yes, it's for Carol."

"I wouldn't be takin' dirty candy like that, Skippy. Let's us eat it."

"After me workin' hard to buy it?" frowned Skippy, looking up. "Anyway, she won't know the difference. I'm cleanin' them off."

"How much did they cost?" asked Barrelhead.

"Twelve 'n' a half cents."

"For fifteen cents ya can get better candy 'n' I'll lend ya the money," suggested Barrelhead. "If we can eat this, I mean. . ."

"Let me see the fifteen cents."

"Here," said Barrelhead, holding out a dime and a nickel.

"I'm on!" cried Skippy.

With their mouths full of candies, the pair started for Barkenteen's. Outside the shop, Barrelhead broke the silence. "She's got a little box with flowers on it, an' she fills it full o' chawklets for fifteen cents—chawklets, mind ja."

At the tinkle of the store bell, Mrs. Barkenteen peered through the glass-beaded curtains of the sitting room.

"I want one of them little fifteen-cent boxes of candy with flowers on it," ordered Skippy, "filled with chawklets!"

Mrs. Barkenteen was sorely troubled. She began to suspect that something was wrong. Forty cents worth of candy in one day—and that from a penny customer. Although she questioned the source of the money, business triumphed over her moral duty. She filled a box decorated with forget-me-nots.

Skippy proudly tucked the chocolates under his arm and started for home. The detaining hand of Barrelhead stopped him.

"How about my fifteen cents?" asked Barrelhead.

"Oh, yeh, that's right," returned Skippy.

"Can I have it now, if I go home with ya, I mean?" inquired Barrelhead.

"Gee, I can't get fifteen cents, just like that!" and Skippy emphasized the remark with a snap of the fingers.

"Ya father's workin', ain't he?"

"Yes, he's workin'."

"Well, what's fifteen cents, huh, only three little nickels," shrugged Barrelhead.

"That's right, only a couple o' little nickels," Skippy agreed.

"Well, when d'ya think ya can round up them

couple o' little nickels?" persisted Barrelhead. "When does ya father get paid?"

"Friday—or is it Saturday?"

"When I lent ya the fifteen cents I thought ya knew all that—C'n I have it tomorrow?"

"Give me time," pleaded Skippy.

"Cross ya heart I'll get it the next day or the very, very next!"

"Maybe I can slip ya something in a couple o' weeks," Skippy promised, crossing his heart.

"A couple o' weeks!" howled Barrelhead, almost frantic. "Let's take it back—right now."

"No! No!" pleaded Skippy, tugging with all his might to break Barrelhead's relentless grasp. "In a week."

"A week," repeated Barrelhead, releasing his hold. "A week's a long time."

"Only six days."

"Seven!" corrected Barrelhead.

"Well, you won't need fifteen cents before seven days."

"Won't I?" glowered Barrelhead. "Maybe I'll fall in love tomorrow—how do I know?"

"If ya do, it'll be just to spite me. Yes, sir, spite work."

"Give me the fifteen cents in a week 'n' I'll make

a card to go on the candy," wheedled Barrelhead. "Tomorrow, even."

"All right, that's fair enough," said Skippy.

"Skippy, (Clap! Clap!) supper on the table," cried his father in the distance.

"See!" said Skippy, "I gotta go!" Spinning, he started away at full speed, leaving his friend shouting every conceivable means of revenge if the money did not appear within a week.

Mr. Krausmeyer was seated behind the caged desk, chuckling over the morning paper. Before him was a picture of a man wearing a monocle. Squinting through the solitary glass in his spectacles, he laughed outright at the ridiculous figure. At the slam of the door his dominant left eye opened and gazed through the empty rim, only to dart back instantly, like sheet lightning, at the sight of Mrs. Barkenteen.

Mrs. Barkenteen stood in the center of the floor, listening to the ticking of the clock. Her mind was still troubled by Skippy's unusual display of wealth. With two cents' worth of soup greens, as an excuse to open the subject, she had crossed the road to confess her troubles to the grocer. She stood embarrassed. Catching sight of a basket of eggs she reached for one, held it to her ear and shook it vigorously. Fail-

ing to hear the tell-tale rattle, she discarded it and hopefully picked up another. Her shawl had slipped; she glanced down at her chest, and selected a safety pin from an array of threaded needles. At the sight of a scarf pin, memories of her departed husband welled up within her. With a brisk sigh, she shook her head and returned to the eggs.

This time she delved under the top layer, feeling her way to the very bottom. Her eyes aglow with confidence, she shook with such energy that the commotion attracted the left eye of the grocer from its habitual coma. The scene was far too great for one eye to hold. The other eye immediately quit a sentence in the middle of a financial report.

In her effort to find an early egg, Mrs. Barkenteen wabbled unsteadily on her rounded heels. The skirt of her dress, cut like a sagging spat, swished with bobbing jolts.

"Some eggs, Mrs. Barkenteen, yes?" said the grocer, wiping the glass of his spectacles.

"Not today, Mr. Krausmeyer."

"No?" glancing significantly at the fingerprints.

"No, I have plenty. I got four yesterday, if you remember."

"Vell, sometings else maybe, yes?"

"Now, let me see," hesitated Mrs. Barkenteen.

"Ve gotted some luffly strawberries," tempted the grocer.

"Heavens, no," she replied, her mouth watering. "I'll just look around."

"Vy not?" and Mr. Krausmeyer, noticing Mrs. Barkenteen's twitching fingers, removed the eggs.

"Mr. Krausmeyer, did you ever hear of a boy spending forty cents for candy?" burst out the candy-store keeper. "In one day, I mean?"

"Who vas dot?"

"Skippy—Skippy Skinner."

"Dot boy spended forty cents already today?" and Mr. Krausmeyer allowed the left eye to gleam from the slit.

"Yes. First he came in with the Marlowe boy and bought a quarter's worth of candy—you know those little chicken corns I sell, I give a cup—"

"Yes, I know—I know!" impatiently. "Vell?"

"Well, it wasn't more than half an hour later, because the potatoes was been to a boil, when in he walks with the Boynton boy. 'I'll have fifteen cents' worth o' chawklets in a flower box,' he sez. I looks at him hard—'Where did you get this money?' I sez. I noticed he couldn't look me in the eye, but I see

him wink at the other one 'n' they fell to whisperin'." She paused and bit her lips. "Do you think I should have sold them the candy?"

"Business is business."

"That's right, but I was wonderin' how he came by so much money."

"Vere vould a loafer get such money!" and the left eye scanned the startled shopkeeper. "I betcha from the mama's pocketbook."

"Oh, Mr. Krausmeyer."

"Vell, vy not?" and, noticing that her downcast eyes remained in a bag of prunes, he grunted, "Some prunes, Mrs. Barkenteen?"

"Er-n-no." The directness of the question flustered her; much against her will, she replied: "I'll take two cents' worth of soup greens."

"Huh!" grumbled the grocer, taking a loose paper scribbled with figures.

Mrs. Barkenteen paid for the greens and hobbled out on uneven heels to prevent stray splinters from piercing her thinning soles. Mr. Krausmeyer's left eye returned to its slumber as he continued reading the financial report. Coming to a row of naughts that took up the width of a column, he mumbled: "Two-cent customers, Ach, Gott!"

Entering her store, Mrs. Barkenteen stooped for the newspaper left by the postman. She subscribed to the paper, not from a desire to read, but mainly because it seemed good to get mail every day. Turning up the light in the dingy shop, her eyes caught spots on the showcases, evidence of boys' sighing breaths. She polished them with her sleeve, and, pausing in the act, sneezed on the glass. "God bless you!" she sprayed. Again she became tense. "Oh! God bless you!" Leaving a lingering fog on the showcase, she passed through the beaded curtains into the cluttered sitting-room and dropped into a horsehair rocker; her loosened shawl dropped to the floor. Prickly horsehair jabbed her bared arms as she swayed to and fro on creaking springs. Unseeing eyes stared at the photograph of her husband's casket, strewn with floral pieces. She had always tried to think of Skippy as a good boy. Yes, he was a good boy; and yet—the thought of the pocketbook throbbed until her head ached. She fingered the spray of greens, only to brush them aside—annoyed.

"Now I'll have to have soup tomorrow." With a listless gesture she reached for plate, cracked cup and saucer.

Late that night, long after the lights of Morrisville were out, long after Bess had ceased to stamp in her

stall, the faint shafts of lantern light speckled the dense foliage about the milkhouse. Inside, Jim Lovering whistled to himself as he swabbed, for the second time that day, two hundred streaked bottles.

CHAPTER XIII

TRUE to his word, Barrelhead was in the schoolyard early the next morning. As Skippy approached with the precious gift, he proudly displayed the card of presentation which he had written. Little did Skippy realize the pains Barrelhead had taken to copy the bird with a scroll in its bill and the sweep of the outspread wings from "A Complete Letter Writer." The inscription on the scroll read simply: "To Carol from Skippy."

"Gee, Barrelhead, it's beeyootiful!" gasped Skippy.

"I'd like to get it back as a sample," began Barrelhead. "'Cause I'm doin' this for nothin'"—Skippy's frown halted him—"Oh, I don't care, she can have it," he concluded, surrendering the card with a long, lingering farewell glance.

"Gee, I'm terribly nervous. Maybe I shouldn't give it after all."

"What! After me stayin' up late to do this card 'n' besides buyin' the candy?" scowled Barrelhead.

"Will you put it on her desk, then?" Skippy requested meekly.

"Sure I will—you betcha!"

They were the first to enter the class. While Skippy nervously paced up and down the aisles, Barrelhead placed the box coolly on Carol Sharon's desk, adjusting and readjusting the card until Skippy was frantic.

"She comes in early. Maybe we better not be around, huh, Barrelhead?"

"Shh! Someone's comin' now, Skippy."

"It's all right," Skippy almost shouted. "Leave it alone, please, Barrelhead."

Skippy's first impulse was to run and get the box again, but a girl had already entered. As she passed Carol's desk, she stopped, looked over at Skippy and then picked up the card.

"Keep ya hands off'n the card! Mustn't be thumbin' up the card," cried Barrelhead.

"Oh, what's eatin' you!"

Another girl entered, then another; in a few minutes they hung around Carol's desk in groups, whispering, tittering, and giggling. Skippy was so frightened that he could not raise his eyes. Perhaps Carol was there. He didn't dare trust himself to look. A scramble told him that Barrelhead was protecting the card from unnecessary examination.

Then the boys began to arrive, gathering around

the desk. Skippy could feel their eyes on his face.

"Skippy loves Carol Sharon!"

The announcement came like a crack of thunder, and the guffaws that followed seemed to increase in rolls of a thousand echoes.

"Skipp-ee loves Carol Sharon—Shar-on!" The entire class took up the chant and beat their palms together in rhythm.

He felt the hot breath of Ray on his neck. "A fine friend *you* are! Double crosser! Cheat! Chawklets no less an' me with a box of chicken corn. Oh! You just wait!" He started to run his fingers through his hair, then remembered the part, and altered the motion to a pat of the crusty surface.

"Shh! Here she comes! Here she comes!"

The girls tittered and ogled; the boys stifled their giggles. The air was frightful with suspense. Skippy's heart froze. His collar choked, and his eyes burned like hot marbles. He heard Carol's footsteps advancing to her seat.

"She's lookin' at it now," hissed Barrelhead. "I hope she don't think you made it."

Skippy's head swam. He couldn't gulp. His fingers seemed to be trying to wind themselves into some sort of a basket before his staring eyes. He heard the girls whispering.

The voice of Somerset lingered in the air: "Ya girl's lookin' at cha, Skippy, look over."

Skippy's teeth bit into his under lip until he tasted blood, but he did not budge.

"Look at her, Skippy, she wants ya to look over," urged a shower of voices.

Skippy's eyes waggled, but he could not focus them on Carol. The muscles strained and strained, until he was conscious of his nose. Then he slowly, slowly turned his head. Carol was smiling. He lowered his head swiftly and his face burned. He was supremely happy.

Miss Larkin entered and school began, but Skippy was in a daze. Carol had smiled—his Carol. When study period arrived, Skippy gave way to dreams under the protecting canopy of a geography book. On the page was a picture of an igloo. To Skippy's eye it immediately became terraced; white lace curtains draped the window and smoke curled from the top of the dome. Countless little children played around the door. Carol stood in the opening with her hands shading her eyes. She was waiting for him. He turned the page. There was a dog team. Yes, he was hurrying over the horizon to Carol with a polar bear for supper. Suddenly her ear caught the faint yip! yip! of the dogs. Wolves closed in on him, and she heard

the distant crack, crack of a rifle. They fell right and left. One circled around and made for the driver's throat. Carol hid her face as he swung the butt of the gun; when she peeked through trembling fingers, wolves lay motionless at his feet. Now the scream of an eagle was heard in the clouds. Carol looked up at a tiny speck soaring overhead. Another faint crack of a rifle struck her ear, and five minutes later an eagle dropped at her feet.

This was for dessert.

Skippy's meditations were interrupted by a nudge. "She sent it over," Barrelhead was saying, and he shoved a tiny little note in Skippy's hand.

He bent lower in the geography and drew the covers close to his ears. Unfolding the piece of paper, he peeked at the contents. It was the picture of a little cottage; there were lace curtains with little tassels in the windows, and smoke was coming from the chimney. He read underneath: "Our house." He became so engrossed in the drawing that he was unaware of the teacher's presence.

"Where did you get that?" asked Miss Larkin, suddenly surprising him.

"What?" asked Skippy, looking behind the geography and under the desk.

"That drawing in your hand," said the teacher.

"Oh, this little thing? Oh, I made this myself. It's a clubhouse we're goin' to build."

"Stand up in the corner; maybe some more suggestions will come to you. There'll be plenty of time for this geography lesson after school."

After lunch Skippy hurried to school. Barrelhead met him in the yard, and ushered him silently into the classroom. Never before had Barrelhead taken such an important part, and he acted very important, as he waved pupils aside with pompous gestures.

Skippy felt himself pushed to the classroom. When he entered a buzz of excitement stopped abruptly. The class wriggled with suppressed smiles as he walked to his seat. It seemed as if the entire floor were covered with baseballs. Carol advanced, holding something in tissue paper.

"Mother said you are to have this," she said, offering him the parcel.

"Er—er—n-no, thank you, er, I—I—n-no-thank . . ." Skippy retreated before the advance of Carol.

"Please take it!" urged Carol.

"N-no—er—thank you," gulped Skippy, so flustered that he backed into a seat and almost fell into a girl's lap.

"G'wan, what's a matter with ya?" yelled Sooky impatiently. "Take it!"

"No, thank you!" mimicked Somerset.

Carol persisted, standing over Skippy. He was so intoxicated by her presence that his tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. Her dress swished a scent of roses; her very nearness radiated through his whole being. She pressed the tissue paper in his hand, and he guessed by its shape and hardness that it was a cup and saucer. His damp collar tightened as he choked, "Thank you—C—Carol."

Oh, what a beautiful name to pronounce. Never had he known happiness until this moment. He had a secret impulse to kiss his own adorable Carol. He had never realized his own unworthiness so much as now.

"Open it up and let a guy see it," Sooky hollered.

"C'mon, let's see what your girl give ya!" entreated Barrelhead.

Nervously, Skippy unwrapped the tissue paper and beheld a tiny green cup and saucer; a card in the cup was inscribed: "From Carol to Skippy."

"Oh, isn't that lovely!" exclaimed a girl.

"Very, very elegant," said Sooky.

Skippy's cheeks deepened into a dark red when Som-

erset enlightened the class by saying: "That's very real love."

All afternoon his throat was parched. He was dying for a drink of water, but he would not leave the room for a second. He was afraid to trust the treasure to the mercy of the class, and yet he was ashamed to take it with him to the cloakroom. When his throat became so dry that it tasted like a mouthful of blotters, Miss Larkin announced that they would take up water colors. A boy traveled up and down the aisle placing little tin pans on each corner of the desks; a girl distributed paint boxes and brushes, and another girl filled the pans from a large pitcher. Skippy's eyes brightened. He stooped down as if to tie a shoe and, in the act, hurriedly gulped the water.

While the class was engrossed in painting, Skippy scribbled a note to Carol and passed it to Barrelhead. From Barrelhead it traveled to Freddie; from Freddie to Sarah; Sarah to Elsie; Elsie to Carol. Skippy waited a few minutes; then the reverse movement started. Barrelhead relayed her answer. It read "Yes." He was to take her home from school. No more would he see her home by dodging behind trees, like a thief in the night. Now he could walk in the middle of the road with her at his side.

Five minutes before dismissal Skippy raised his

hand and asked for a drink of water. Having gained permission, he scooped the treasure under his coat, holding it in place with rigid forearm. He allayed further suspicion by fumbling at a coat button as if it were about to drop off. Safely in the coat room, he grabbed his hat. It was his only chance. He had no intention of staying after school; not when he had the privilege of walking home with Carol.

In his heart he knew that this was unpardonable disobedience, and his punishment would be severe. No doubt, he would have to answer to the Principal. After all, what was that? The worst he could get was ten strokes with a rattan. He had been through that before. For an instant he recalled the smarting pain that he had suffered at the last offense, all because he took it on his own shoulders to hoist the flag at half mast at the death of Somerset's grandmother. Perhaps this was worse. Perhaps they would give him twenty whacks. Still, Skippy figured optimistically, the Principal might be considerate enough to divide them between both hands. Down in his heart he even prayed that he would get some punishment such as had never been meted out before. If suffering could win a smile from his lady love, where was the sting of pain?

He put his lips to the faucet, gulped, and held the

mouthful of water until his cheeks bulged. In utter disdain he surveyed the walls and the ceiling. To him they represented the entire Board of Education. Defiance gleamed in his eye. Perhaps the Army and Navy were ready to back up the Board of Education in such emergencies. Well, bring them on! With a deep breath, Skippy squirted the contents of his mouth in the direction of the coat room. The water landed with a splash. He scurried from the basin, curved out the door, hugging the treasure as he ran, and only stopped when he arrived at a large tree.

He peeped carefully from behind the trunk. School was out and he searched the groups for Carol. She was advancing toward him, the tree was directly in her path. As she approached Skippy hurriedly glanced toward school. Yes, Miss Larkin was at the window. No matter. He stepped out and tipped his hat to Carol.

"Should I . . . may you . . . can I take . . . take your books?" he stuttered, blushing furiously.

"Oh, thank you, yes," smiled Carol, "but I think Miss Larkin is looking for you. Don't you remember that you were to stay after school this afternoon?"

"Did she say I was to stay after school this afternoon?" asked Skippy, increasing the distance between them and the school.

"My, aren't you a fast walker?" said Carol.

"Yeh . . . yes," agreed Skippy. "It's such a lovely day for walking, don't you think?"

"Quite nice," agreed Carol.

"I get ten cents allowance every week."

"Yes?"

"I don't need it, though."

"Why don't you save it?"

"Oh, I dunno—I—I thought maybe you could use it."

"Why don't you spend it, then?"

"I wouldn't give that for all the money in the world."

"Ten cents a week is a lot of money, if you save it."

"'N' that ain't all—I sell nails to my father 'n' get five cents extra."

"Where do you get the nails?"

"Oh, around all these new buildin's goin' up."

"Do you mean that you take them away?"

"Oh, sure! When the carpenters drop them they never pick 'em up. Besides they got kegs 'n' kegs of em."

"Don't they say anything?"

"Oh, no! 'cause I always wait until they're gone so's I won't be in the way. Besides, my father won't take 'em unless there's a little spot o' rust on 'em."

"Oh!"

"I get two cents extra for rubbin' off the spots o' rust."

"My father builds all these new houses," and Carol pointed to a row in the course of construction. "And there will be lots more as soon as he can get more carpenters."

"Er-them nails—I don't get them any more," added Skippy hurriedly. "'N' besides I wouldn't think o' takin' 'em unless they was just a little teeny weeny bit bent."

Carol was silent.

"I bet if I saved 'n' saved—just my ten cents, I mean—I could buy one o' these houses." Skippy longed to say "we."

"They're going to be very pretty."

"I'd love to live in one 'n' have Ray and Jennie live next door 'n' their children could come over 'n' play—could come over 'n' play. . ."

Skippy was thankful for the sudden burst of hammers that seemed to beat in unison. When the noise subsided into the regular beat, they had passed the row.

"Yes, yes," said Skippy, as they walked on in silence, and he tried to recall what they had been talking about.

"I know where there are some lovely violets," said Carol. "Do you like violets?"

"Oh, violets—yes, indeed!"

"And I just love May flowers." As she spoke Skippy summoned up enough courage to look at her radiant face. A soft zephyr swayed her wavy black hair. She was so beautiful that Skippy had all he could do to keep from turning somersaults. However, he managed to walk by her side very stiffly. Somehow or other, he felt that he was on springs.

"Oh, I love all the flowers!" Carol was saying.

"Yes, indeed!" said Skippy, and he added, "Forget-me-nots is a very nice flower." Then he blushed furiously and gave a silly laugh, only to redden the more. The forefinger that he thrust down his collar gave him but little relief.

"Yes, forget-me-nots are beautiful," and she lowered her eyes. He blinked. It was true; she was blushing.

They passed through a patch of woods, and Skippy plucked a violet from the black dirt. He added another and then another, until he had gathered a small bouquet. In the quietness of the woods his timidity disappeared. As he stooped to gather the flowers, he performed many acrobatic feats, each more daring than the last.

"Oh, I'm afraid you're going to hurt yourself. Please don't," pleaded Carol.

Hurt himself! Why, he'd jump from the tallest pine tree to win the tears of Carol.

"We must hurry now," cautioned Carol, "because I must take my music lesson."

"Yes, indeed!" said the perspiring Skippy.

When they arrived at her door, Skippy reluctantly surrendered the books.

"Thank you so much," Carol was saying. "Good-bye." She ran lightly up the steps.

"Good-bye," said Skippy, conscious that he had forgotten something. What it was he could not recall. When she had gone, after a farewell wave of her hand, he remembered. He had neglected to tip his hat.

"That's one girl I could sit 'n' chew the fat with for hours," and Skippy stretched out on the lawn and was lost in meditation.

CHAPTER XIV

EVERY Monday was singing day in the school. Each week that morning was enhanced by the appearance of Miss Bilkens, the music teacher, who swished and bustled throughout the classes, leaving in her wake a chorus of fluttering and rejoicing "Ahs!" from the girls. Miss Larkin strained to catch her spurty skips. When they became audible, she brought the class to rigid attention.

Promptly at ten the door flew open with a bang and the class beheld Miss Bilkens, bursting forth into song.

"OOOOOH . . . AAAAAH . . . . EEEEEeee . . ." she warbled: "Good morning, children! OOO OOH . . . AAAAAH . . . EEEEEeee . . . !"

"OOOOOH . . . AAAAAH . . . EEEEEeee . . . Good morning, Miss Bilkens. OOOOOH . . . AA AAAH . . . EEEEEeee . . . !"

Cooing and wheedling, she syruped: "Now, my little ducklings, if you have a very good music lesson, do-ra-me-fa . . . do-ra-me-fa-so . . . do-ra-me-fa-so-la . . . Have you a tuning fork, Miss Larkin? Do-ra-me

fa- . . . OOOOH, thank yoooou, Miss Lawkornn. If you have a very good lesson, I am going to let you sing 'The Mouse in the Meadow' in three parts. So far this morning everyone has gotten such excellent marks that they have earned the right to sing 'The Mouse in the Meadow'; and now I know my favorite class is going to have a good lesson, too . . . ra-meee . . . see, my little bunnies, big round tones . . . OO OOOH . . . AAAAAH . . . EEEEEeee . . . !" and she drew forth imaginary strings of chewing gum in demonstration.

Flouncing to the blackboard, after ten minutes of coltish bounces, Miss Bilkens paused where the grades in music were inscribed. So far there were nothing but A's for the last five months but she always made her class-rating a frightful moment of suspense. With head cocked on the side, she faced the class, peering quizzically around the room until the little girls sagged under the strain. With a sudden spin the chalk snapped another A, amid the relieved "Ahs" of the girls and the muttered "Blahs" of the boys.

Laying down the chalk, Miss Bilkens tore off a couple of tra-la-las, much to the delight of the adoring girls. Backing out of the door until only her head protruded she hummed: "Now, my little cherubs, good morning, and what does Miss Bilkens want to

hear when she comes next week?" Without waiting for an answer she broke forth in a volume of OH, AH,EE's accompanied by yards of gum-pulling, and skipped away.

The class was generally brought out of its unconscious state by Miss Larkin, who always followed these visits with a singing lesson of her own. She announced that they would sing "The Mouse in the Meadow" in three parts, and with a pendulum movement of her forearm, she started the first two rows of girls. They sang so appealingly that even little Willie Mouse would have paused in his haunts to listen, enraptured.

With the least sign of a good lesson, Miss Larkin would move toward the door and open it ajar, perhaps to show the other teachers that Miss Bilkens was not entirely responsible for the harmony of 4-B. After the next two rows had joined in the refrain, the door was well open.

The last three rows contained nothing but boys Scenting the teacher's intent, they burst forth at her signal in a chorus of meows, cat calls, and cow-moo-ings, drowning the girls with bellows of discord. The door slammed in fury. Miss Larkin wheeled in time to see Skippy, with hands cupped over his mouth, en-

deavoring to make up for the absence of five mooers.

"Skippy Skinner will remain after school," she commanded.

Skippy blushed a deep scarlet, more at the teacher's unfairness than from any sense of wrongdoing. Feeling the sympathetic glances of friends, Skippy brooded like a martyr.

As the class filed out, dismissed, his eyes followed Carol. She never even looked in his direction. Alone in the classroom, Skippy's gaze traveled through the open windows as he watched the bees, floating among the flowers in the window boxes. At the sight of a humming bird he held his breath. What a prize if he could catch it. With catlike movement he advanced on his prey, but in vain. It flitted away.

Skippy peered out and watched the departing class, then drew back startled as he saw Barrelhead tip his hat to Carol. She smiled and lowered her eyes at something he was telling her. Skippy couldn't believe his eyes. Yes, she was offering her books! Carol Sharon—his girl.

He watched long after they had disappeared, the terrible picture imprinted on his mind. Everything that he had held dear was suddenly swept from under him. There was nothing left but the sea. He would sweep

the world, trying to forget. If only he had a picture of her to carry on his lonely voyages, something to console him on a storm-tossed ocean. Perhaps he would be gone years. Carol would know that he had never married. It suddenly occurred to him that she had something in her album that he had written. The lines came home to him; they seemed to be scrawled across the summery sky:

"Many may wish you happiness while passing
through this life,
But none will love thee more than one who
calls thee wife."

The memory of the lines deepened his loneliness. He imagined Barrelhead's children pawing over his message of love with greasy fingers, as they traced the outpouring of a tender passion. Skippy hated the unborn children from the bottom of his heart. How dare they thumb that album with their chop-stained fingers! How could Carol let them! He prayed that their children would have such barrelheads that they could only be taken out after dark.

The thought of the album recalled the little plan he drew of their home. How she had smiled across the desks at him when he had passed it to her yesterday. Those happy moments together. And now Barrel-

head would live in that house. Skippy listened to the hammering. Perhaps even now they were building that very house. Now every beat of the hammers would remind him of her. How could he forget while the constant beat would go on and on—and she had said, only the other day, that it was but the beginning. He turned away sick at heart, and was confronted by Miss Larkin. She had evidently been standing behind him for some time.

"Why, Skippy, you don't look well," he heard her say. "Are you ill?"

"Yes'm, I . . . No'm." His voice sounded far away.

"You had better go home," she advised.

What did home mean to him now? The sea was his home, the open prairies, yes, and the jungles. Languidly he lifted his hat from the hook and shuffled toward home. Some friends were headed his way. He hid in the bushes, ashamed, until their steps died in the distance. By every roundabout path and short-cut, avoiding all company, he reached home at last, and sneaked up to his room unobserved.

Locking his door, he got out the little green cup and saucer. It was still wrapped in the tissue paper. That was dearer to him than the present, because it had been nearer to her. Her fingers had touched that very

paper . . . that wonderful tissue paper. Perhaps, by some chance, it had even brushed her cheek. Impulsively he gathered it up and pressed it to his own, tenderly. Oh! if only he could bring back the day that she had placed it in his hands. Very gently he unwrapped the folds of paper, and taking the little card out of the cup, read: "To Skippy from Carol."

He could stand it no longer! It was unbearable! He thought of the hours he had spent fixing his pompadour—for what? While others had been out playing, he had been barbering or washing milk bottles. At the very thought his cheeks flamed with anger. He grabbed the cup and saucer, tucked it in his blouse, and crept downstairs to the back of the house.

Placing the green cup and saucer on the most prominent part of the back fence, Skippy gathered every stone within reach. Hurling them one after another, he gave vent to uncontrollable fury. Nearer and nearer they sailed to the fragile target. One crashed, scattering fragments of green china in every direction.

He knew that their romance was shattered forevermore. As if to accentuate the fact, he ran his fingers through his crusty pompadour, until it was ruffled beyond recognition. He paused and listened.

"Go on! Hammer away! Don't mind me. Build a house for Barrelhead. Go on! Hammer! Hammer!"

and Skippy turned away, trying to forget the hammering that beat in his own breast.

A half hour later Skippy wandered over to Jim Lovering's barn, munching a piece of bread and butter sprinkled with sugar.

CHAPTER XV

DECEMBER blasts swayed the trees of Morrisville and leaves freckled a leaden sky. The gusts swept over frozen roads until the passerby bent to the wind behind the refuge of a muffler. It was Christmas Eve, and red-ribboned wreaths hung resplendent in white frosty windows. In kitchens and living rooms, melted spots appeared in the center of the tiny panes.

In a bundle of worn-out clothes Sooky huddled against a pile of lumber, away from the wind. During winter months shivering was about the only exercise Sooky got. He tried to whistle between teeth clicks, while his eyes feasted on a row of Christmas trees in front of Krausmeyer's store. By night, he knew, they would glisten with balls and dazzling trinkets, and chalky strings of popcorn would loop in and out between the cornucopias and sparkling candles. Sooky looked away. "Gee, a cold certainly makes ya eyes water," he gulped, and stamped his thinning soles upon the frozen ground. Surprised by the sud-

den arrival of Skippy he caught a quick breath and whistled a jig tune.

"'Lo, Sook," panted Skippy. "Happy Columbus Day! Happy April Fool's Day. Merry Fourth of July!"

"What's the matter with Arbor Day?" replied Sooky.

"That oofs me. How did you think of that?" asked Skippy.

"Oh, I don't know. It just come."

"What are ya standin' here for—waitin' for Krausmeyer to give ya a present?" asked Skippy.

"Yeh, he promised to roll out a grape."

"Ev'ry Christmas he has company 'n' they eat off o' doll's dishes to make a chop look like a roast. 'N' s'help me if I ain't seen 'em blow up a prune for dessert."

"That's nothin'," put in Sooky. "I heard they make Lizzie wear a hot-water bottle so she'll think she's fat."

"Last Christmas the postman wore his hands to knuckles before he found out that the cigars was pasted to the bottom of the box," said Skippy confidentially.

"Ya know what I heard—cheese it," cautioned Sooky suddenly. "He's lookin' over."

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Krausmeyer," Skippy called.

"Yeh, we was just talkin' about ya," apologized Sooky.

"Ach, loafers!" grunted Krausmeyer, squinting through a single pane, and slamming the door.

"Don't you feel like you just can't wait until Christmas?" Skippy jigged in joyful anticipation. "Think of it—tomorrow, no less."

"Oh, I don't know, Skip," drawled Sooky. "I'm just kinda fed up with nothin' but the same old toys every year."

"I've been over to your house and I never seen no toys. No, sir! Not even one little toy."

"Oh, of course! I forgot. It's New Year's when I get mine. Oh, Boy!"

"What's the matter with Christmas?" inquired Skippy. "Don't ya b'leeve in it or somethin'?"

"Oh, sure! I b'leeve in it, but it's the Uncles and Aunts wot does it. I just only wisht you could see the toys they bring. Honest! Without 'zadjeration, ya can't move around without trippin' over them."

"What do ya do with all these toys? Nobody ever sees 'em."

"I just give 'em to the poor."

"Gee, I forgot. What are ya doin' tonight?"

"Why, I don't know right like that. What's doin'?"

"Well, I was goin' down to Marlowe's for supper, and Ray tells me they are going to have quite a gang at the house. Why don't you come on down?"

"He never said nothin' to me about it," said Sooky.

"Well, I'm askin' you, ain't I? So come on along."

"No, I can't." Sooky hesitated. "There'll be a lot of company at our house, and I got to stick around."

"Well, I gotta run and get my Christmas shopping done. S'long, Sook."

"Oh, you're late—mine's done long ago. I got my mother another apron."

"Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!" shouted Skippy in a jingle of coins.

"Aw, the hell wid New Year's!" burst out Sooky. . . . Then, "M-Merry Christmas, Skip!"

Sooky wandered down the street, attracted by the flaring light of the new store of Morrisville that had just been built. It was a small department store and it had a window display of many different toys. Already last-minute shoppers hustled to its doors, and Sooky counted them as they entered. He did this until his mind wandered and he forgot the count. As night fell he started over toward the window display, but stopped before Mrs. Barkenteen's. What a change from last year, he thought. He stared at the dingy light in her window, where heaps of cotton drowned

little Santa Clauses. Scattered here and there were little stockings, filled with candy that could easily be seen through the netted material. Sooky peered into the store. It was empty; but through the glass-beaded curtains he could see Mrs. Barkenteen rocking back and forth, ready for any Christmas rush.

While he looked in the window his hand searched for two cold pennies that he had been nursing for days. He found them at last after taking out a handful of grit and fuzz from his pocket. Before he had fully made up his mind as to their disposal, he lifted the latch. At the sound of the ting-a-ling over the door, Mrs. Barkenteen sprang from the rocker and smoothed her dress. She had primped up for holiday trade, and her face had been scrubbed to a polish. Her hair was drawn to a topknot so tightly that it glistened in contrast with the black velvet bow that circled it. As she smiled faintly, Sooky noticed that her gold tooth had been chamoised to a polish.

He had gone in for the express purpose of purchasing a netted candy stocking, but instinct sent him up against the counter until he leaned far over. With rested elbows Sooky slid along the polished counter with gliding sleeves. Easing from one end to the other, he surveyed the contents with hungry eyes.

"Come, come, I can't wait all night. This is Christ-

mas Eve," and Mrs. Barkenteen glanced toward the door as if she expected it to be battered down in a sudden rush of customers.

"How much is the chicken corn?"

"Two cupfuls for a cent."

"Why, Mrs. Barkenteen!"

"Two cupfuls for a cent."

"How much is the jelly beans?"

"Jelly beans has gone up—one cupful for a cent."

"How much is them candies in the little stockin's?"

Mrs. Barkenteen took her eyes off the door for the first time and searched the case.

"No, I mean them in the window," Sooky prompted.

"Oh, yes, o' course," Mrs. Barkenteen shrugged. Cocking her head on one side she explained with an apologetic smile: "Well now, them's a little more expensive. They's two cents."

"Well, I'll take one. Christmas is only once a year."

"Yes, we only live once," sighed Mrs. Barkenteen absently. "That's what I used to tell my husband, when I'd try to get him to get his picture took 'n' he . . ."

"That's a Santy Claus ya got in ya hand," interupted Sooky, following her to the window.

"Gracious me! So 'tis."

She returned with the purchase, and gathered the

two pennies as she handed it over the counter. Sooky sauntered toward the door, and called over his shoulder: "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Barkenteen!"

"'N' a Merry Christmas to you, 'n' don't forget to tell Mamma I was askin' for her. By the way, how has Mamma been doin'?"

"Oh, so-so—we can't kick."

"Well, I guess things'll pick up when people move into them new houses."

"Oh, sure—I guess."

"Yes, indeed!" sighed Mrs. Barkenteen, and, as Sooky was about to lift the latch, she called, "Just a minute." She beckoned to him with a forefinger, while the other hand drew a chocolate cream drop out of the case. "'N' this is for Christmas."

After the ting-a-ling died Mrs. Barkenteen sought the rocker. She rocked to and fro, stopping suddenly at the slightest sound and peering through the curtains. Gingerly arranging the folds of the stiffly starched apron in her lap, she darted a sudden glance at the mirror and noted the effect of her gold tooth when she smiled. Then she turned so that her profile appeared in the glass; resting her chin on the tips of her daintily-posed hand, Mrs. Barkenteen struck a haughty attitude and glanced casually into the mirror as if she were totally unconscious of her stunning appearance. Her

eye wandered and lit on the photograph of her husband's flower-strewn casket. She regarded it for some time; when she turned back to the mirror, it swam before her eyes.

"Lan' sakes!" said Mrs. Barkenteen, rising briskly. "These shoppers have no pity on us storekeepers. Here I've been primped up all evenin'." She adjusted the sprig of mistletoe over the photograph.

For days Sooky had watched the new store's Christmas display until he knew the contents by heart. As night fell, he stood entranced with the radiance of the scene. Forgetting the numbness of his feet and never realizing that his hat was white with snow, he gazed until hustling shoppers had thinned to storekeepers returning home for the night. As the lights began to go out in the window Sooky became conscious of numbness. Even then he hated to leave and edged backwards slowly. With a long, final glance he turned away.

"Another day 'n' all this'll be gone." He stamped homeward, rubbing his palms together. "Oh, well, they can't take wishin' away from a feller."

As Sooky pushed through the falling snow he hesitated, then stopped, awed by the stillness of the night. He loved the lull of falling flakes. One tickled his nose; another flicked an eyelash and hung by a single

hair. In all directions lighted windows sparkled against the metal blueness of the snowy night. In the distance he could distinguish the lights of Marlowe's and he moved toward them with muffled tread. A long braid of footprints trailed after the tiny black figure as it wormed through the orchard and over the hill toward the house, where smoke rose from the chimney and windows gleamed like the isinglass door of a radiant stove.

Directly in front of the house was a towering pine. Beneath this shelter, Sooky leaned over a long horizontal bough, silhouetted against the sitting-room window streaming with light. His view was framed by the porch, allowing him only slanting glimpses of the hall through the glass panels and the fan-shaped transom of the door. Farthest from him, the long parlor window disclosed a gingerbreaded organ.

Through a veil of floating webs, Sooky gazed into the crowded sitting-room. Men hung around the nickel-topped stove, drinking and smoking; he imagined its warmth by the glow of copper red. Pretty girls pointed at the ceiling, and, giggling, hid their faces; older women exchanged glances and smiled. A wreath hid part of the ceiling, and Sooky slid along the bough. By stretching on tiptoe, he could see strange children romping in the dining-room. Skippy was standing

over a large bowl of cookies, making exaggerated gestures; as Sooky watched narrowly, Skippy's hand swooped into the pile and instantly darted into a bulging pocket.

"Ah, that's the time I ketched him."

He was startled by the distant bang of a barn door, and peeked under the branches in the direction of Lovering's. Jim must be turning in for the night, Sooky thought, as he watched the foggy rays of the lantern disappear. The crowd was leaving the sitting-room and sauntering into the parlor. He ducked under the bough and retraced his path down through the hollow. Midway he stopped.

In the deep silence of the orchard Sooky heard the faint peals of the parlor organ. Voices blended in a Christmas carol. With chattering teeth Sooky joined in the singing: "Silent Night, Holy Night . . ." He blew into the holes of his icy little palms: "That damn thing's as old as the hills."

Leaping over his tracks he ran for home, pausing now and then for breath. At the sight of a solitary light in the kitchen of his house, he redoubled his gait. Reaching the broken latticework under the porch, he groped for some time in search of his mother's present. Suddenly it occurred to him that he had changed the hiding place back to the leader pipe. With the

package in his hand, he pressed the paper until he was certain that the price tag was still undisturbed. He entered the house, whistling.

Under blankets and tattered clothes Sooky listened to the Christmas chimes. His teeth no longer clicked, but ground together now in an effort not to wonder about it all. Despite every effort, hot tears trickled on the bare mattress.

"Only one more day 'n' it'll all be over but the shoutin'."

Sooky watched the puffs of vapor silhouetted against the frosted panes. Somehow the thought almost cheered him.

Snuggling deeper into the covers he thought of Skippy and chuckled: "Fancy that guy getting away with ten under their very noses."

He scrubbed his nose back and forth with a forefinger, and sniffled. "I wonder what kind of cookies them was?"

CHAPTER XVI

During winter months Jim Lovering closed the sides of the milk-wagon, making it practically impossible for anyone to ride on the step. Skippy tried it once; but it grew very monotonous without Jim's conversation, and in addition the icy handle penetrated through the warmest mittens.

Personally, Jim was immune to cold. During the bitterest part of winter he drove in his thin black shirt, his suspenders damp from bottle rinsing. As if to show his utter indifference, he would pick up the reins with wet hands, seemingly unconscious of their lobster redness. Jim kept the wagon closed to protect the milk from freezing. When he left a bottle on a stoop he would figure the weather beforehand, and choose a nook well out of the cold wind. In some instances, he even wrapped bagging over it; but those so favored were very old customers—as Jim put it, "worth fifty o' them Five Hundred Dollar Millionaires." The old inhabitants never let their milk freeze, consequently Jim had no use for people who did, de-

spite the fact that the former were far outnumbered.

Old residents took the Lovering milk-wagon as their thermometer. When the doors were open, people left their umbrellas home, and in some cases their overcoats. Even the children, seeing the open wagon, would complain about their heavy woolens. The first robin was only a robin when Jim's wagon said so; for Jim could scent storm clouds from afar. However, it was only when Skippy's mittens began to dry out that Mrs. Skinner looked for spring.

The doors of the milk-wagon had been open for weeks; and budding trees fairly sparkled against the sombre cedars. It was spring in Morrisville. Warm breezes melted through the tall elms; shutters were opened and windows raised, and all indoors held the fragrance of April.

Skippy ambled along Elm Street, rattling a pocketful of marbles; his roving eyes scanned the road in search of easy prey when he spied the milk-wagon turning a corner. Jim sent some clinking empty bottles to the back of it.

"Git up, ya old carcass!" he called, as Bess started off.

"Hey, Jim! Wait for me, Jim!"

"Whoa!" Jim gave a tug, then his wrist dropped limp on his lap. The hand with the reins dangled

over his knee, and he sucked a corner tooth. Noting out of the corner of his eye that Skippy was safely on the step, he flipped the reins. Bess sauntered forward again.

"Your wagon needs paintin', don't it, Jim?"

"And your face needs washin', don't it, son?"

They jogged along for a few minutes, and halted in front of a group of new houses. "New customers, huh, Jim?"

"A milkman's got to live, ain't he?"

"Lot's o' people got to live."

"'N' you'll see lots of 'em, if that's what's worryin' ya," Jim paused. "D'ya hear anything?"

"Only hammerin'."

"Yes, 'n' that's been goin' on steady for a year now. Jim leaned out the door to empty his cheek. "Yes, sir, another year 'n' the big town'll squirt them out here, 'n' then they won't be able to get back 'n' forth quick enough. So they'll put up a squawk for a trolley-line an' ten to one they'll get it, too. If I don't know another thing, I do know that politicians 'd crawl lower than a turtle's belly button for a vote." Jim reached in the back of the wagon and put four bottles of milk in a wire basket. "Suppose ya put a bottle on each o' them Christmas cookie steps. Ya needn't go to the back doors, 'cause I got to make time.

"Politicians," he mused, as Skippy departed with the basket, "they's all in swallow tails an' every time they bow they look like claw hammers, ready to beat the nation."

Although the houses were all close together, cement walks divided them like the keys of a piano; these were roped off carefully, as though the inmates expected lawns to sprout in the intervening spaces overnight. The old lawns of Morrisville sprawled and Skippy zigzagged through the front yards at will. These bald patches of roped-off dirt were something new to him and he picked his way cautiously. Even as he returned to the wagon, Skippy walked like a workman moving around on the iron skeleton of a sky scraper, for a severe cement walk ran parallel with the gutter. These strips of space were likewise roped in, enclosing rows of scrawny little maples wrapped in bagging.

"Lawns no bigger'n a bed quilt," mumbled Jim, as he waited for Skippy to return, "and yet if ya told them they wasn't gentlemen farmers they'd be dumbfounded like as not. To hear 'em blow about what they got, ya'd think diamonds came in sugar barrels." He glared and then his eyes softened as he gazed through the houses as though they were so many

spider webs. "'N' to think how me an' her used to sit here an' look at the sun settin'." With a start Jim realized that he was staring into the emptiness of a tin phonograph horn in a window. "God Almighty!" He chopped a plug of tobacco with a single bite.

"That's some place to leave milk in, b'leeve me," said Skippy, approaching the wagon.

"Yes, an' only a little while ago that place was the prettiest spot in all Morrisville," mused Jim. "It used to seem like an altar to me."

"I used to play around there when it was all open, but maybe that was before your time, Jim."

"Why, you half a peanut, I used to bounce you on my knee," replied Jim. "Oh, well, those days are over."

"Oh, yes, I remember you used to come with my nurse. Do you remember Cora, Jim?"

"Cora . . . yes."

"You wasn't the only one that came to see Cora, though, 'cause one day a man come an' Cora forgot all about me an' let me get lost."

"All right, you were lost, an' now let's talk about somethin' else."

"Don't ya think it's awful to be left alone like that?"

"Oh, forget it!"

"Yeh, but wait till I tell ya, Jim, she went away with

this strange man an' never come back. Oh, an' that ain't all. . . ."

"Well she's gone an' that ends it!"

"Why did she leave me for a man?"

"Forget it!"

"Well, wouldn't you get sore if a girl left you. . . ."

"Stop!" Jim's voice was like the crack of a whip; it left Skippy staring, amazed, trembling. It frightened Bess, and the wagon rattled up the street. With wide eyes he watched Jim's big hairy hand tighten on the reins until the veins stood out; the knuckles slowly relaxed. "God, son, I hope you never have rheumatism."

"Gee, I'm awfully sorry, Jim, but I didn't mean to do nothin'."

"Oh, it's nothin', son. Say, speakin' of your strange man—they's one wants to see you about somethin'. He's been lookin' for you I hear."

"The same man?"

"Well, this one's got a moustache."

"What does he want to see me about?"

"I don't know, but he owns the Anderson farm now an' I'm thinkin' Krausmeyer better get that other glass in his spectacles when he lets a thing like that slip under his nose; why——"

"But why should he want to see me?"

"I don't know but if he's the man I think he is . . . well, just watch out!"

"What did he say?"

"I don't know, but 'taint what they say," drawled Jim, "it's what they don't say."

"What does he look like?" inquired Skippy.

"When he smiles he makes me think of oil cloth; 'n' I was never able to stand the slippery stuff. Anything that'll shine with a swab of slimy water can't be clean underneath," Jim said. "Then he has a moustache with two sharp points like the fangs of . . . oh, well."

"Where c'n I find him?" Skippy asked.

"He'll be down at the Anderson farm, I take it. Seems from what he didn't say that he's puttin' up some kind of a real estate office."

"What's his name, Jim?"

"His name's Prince."

"Well, I think I'll get off here, Jim, as long as you're headin' for the stable," said Skippy. "Tell ya what I'll do—I'll go down 'n' see him soon. S'long, Jim."

"S'long, son. Keep ya tongue in ya cheek."

Jim stood before the barn doors, drying his steaming hands on greasy pants. His hairy nostrils sucked in an emerald sky. After a succession of rapid sniffs he grumbled: "They's a storm comin'." His brow lowered until his eyes assumed the inky deepness of a

mountain lake before the silence of night; they gleamed once like the flash of a leaping bass. He looked at the broadness of his wrinkled palms. "It'll just take one good wringin' to make oil cloth crack, and then. . . . God, how it'll crack!"

CHAPTER XVII

In the most prominent window of the Boynton home a glass picture of Niagara Falls hung by a brass chain, and subscription salesmen, seeing this, assumed that they could sell the inmates anything.

The library table was consequently littered with every scientific magazine imaginable; and Barrelhead pored over these night and day. Whenever a new magazine arrived, he tore the wrapper and flapped the pages to the advertisements. His eyes glistened on cuts of pistols, dribble glasses, nose blowers and soup plate tippers. Fingering through the pages he paused aghast before a dazzling announcement: "Know the Universe! Cause your friends to gasp at your knowledge of the Planets! Fathom the unknown! Act Now!"

Barrelhead's hand trembled as he clipped the dotted line; with wavering fingers he followed the instructions to the letter. His confidence returned as he inscribed the envelope after dropping in fifty cents in stamps. In a surge of talent he scrawled the address in the large flourishing hand that was the envy of all

young Morrisville. After great thought, Barrelhead lapped the stamps over the upper right-hand corner of the envelope in order that the sweeping scroll should not be cramped.

For the following week, with the exception of meal and school hours, young Boynton lived in the Post Office. Every five minutes he would sidle up to the window and ask: "Now just what do ya suppose keeps that package I sent for?"

"What kind of package did ya say 'twas?" inquired the weary postmaster, without glancing at the questioner.

"It's a long package for Edward Randolph Boynton!" replied Barrelhead, pronouncing the name so clearly that his teeth clicked.

"Give it time! Give it time!" consoled the postman, shooting the letters in various cubby holes.

"I did, 'n' I think somethin' oughta be done about it!" complained Barrelhead.

"Well, what do ya want me to do?" queried the postman, "Go out and buy the letter carriers roller skates?"

As Skippy entered the Post Office, Barrelhead greeted him with frantic flappings: "It didn't come! It didn't come! Three days already an' it didn't come!"

"You don't mean it!" sympathized Skippy. "Fancy

that! Three days!" Then in a menacing tone: "Ya know what I'd do, dontcha? I'd just sit down 'n' write: 'My father's a Policeman!' Yes, sir! A Policeman! Oh, I'd just sing out with a hell of a letter."

"Hey, you!" interrupted the voice from behind the cage. "Take that chatter outside till I sort this new bunch of mail!"

As the postmaster shuffled the letters to a monotone of youthful laments from a darkened corner of the room, he spotted a long package. "Thank God!" he sighed, and sent it skidding through the window into the arms of Barrelhead. A swish and a slam and the fading clippety! clap! of pattering feet left the faint echo of a smile on the postmaster's face.

It was already dusk and supper was waiting. Moreover, the boys felt it would be sacrilegious to take more than a tiny peep at the contents of the box until nightfall. They only parted after Barrelhead had crossed and recrossed himself in a solemn oath not to look through the telescope until after supper.

Still chewing the last cuds of their suppers, the friends met again, ready at last to fathom the mystery of endless space. As Barrelhead prepared to level the telescope at the heavens, he was pinned by Skippy's grip on the instrument. "Not here!" frowned Skippy. "Up on the roof where it's nearer."

Without waiting for an argument, Skippy hastened to the corner of the house and shinnied up the lightning rod with such an air of decision that his partner was forced to follow suit. In their feverish excitement, the pair soon reached the ridge of the roof. When they were safely astraddle, Barrelhead took a deep breath and leveled the telescope flush with the moon. Skippy had expected to see Barrelhead topple off the house with surprise; and he grew uneasy at the stillness of his friend. He was unable to control his curiosity any longer. "What seems to be going on up there?" he asked.

"A half a dollar for this damn thing!" was the unhappy response. "Why, it's littler, or I need glasses or somethin'."

"Let me look!" Skippy jerked the treasure from his friend's hand.

"Oh! Ah! My! I shouldn't 'a' b'leeved it! No, sir!" marveled Skippy, rocking from side to side. "But now with my own eyes I see it." His eyes burrowed through the tube. "Oh, boy! That's a moon what *is* a moon!"

"Give us it!" cried Barrelhead, seizing the telescope and pressing a bulging orb in the smaller end.

Skippy was about to make a plunge for the spyglass, but he lost his balance for a moment and wabbled un-

steadily. With beating heart he remembered that he was on the roof, and contented himself with second-hand information.

"Do ya see any people or houses or somethin'?" inquired Skippy breathlessly.

"Nope! Not one little man," was the disappointing answer.

"It'd be just our luck to have 'em all live on the other side," moaned Skippy.

After changing to the other eye, Barrelhead was reasonably certain that there was no life discernible. Reluctantly he passed the glass to the pawing hands in the rear.

With hopes beating high, Skippy snatched the glass and put it to his eye. His mind had been made up and upon one point he was certain, that no planet, star or microbe, dancing in endless space would escape him. Would people be walking around on big balls, wearing nightgowns? If they played harps, who did they get learned off of? Perhaps angel cops would be chasing little boys who were using their halos for hooples. Shame on them! He decided to have a peep at one of their days and see what a million years looked like. He watered his eyes staring, but not the slightest sign of life was visible. It would have been a source of contentment to have seen even one little man prowling

around on a star. He finally decided that all the people were living on the other side of the moon, totally unaware of the side he was gazing at, and people who should have known better. With a lingering shot at the moon, he returned the telescope: "I'd give anything for a cheese cake."

The telescope changed hands many times during the next hour; but the moon continued to be the moon and nothing else. For some time they aimed at the stars and vainly tried to discover one that had five points. Failing in this they became convinced that the only real stars were on the American flag. They turned the glass on each other, but everything seemed to blur. Presently they lost all interest.

Silhouetted against the moon two little figures straddled the ridge of the Boynton house. They sat for some time without a move, while lights began to disappear one by one in the surrounding houses. The silence was broken only by the distant baying of a dog, and the soft swaying of the treetops.

"Don't it seem funny when you look around from up here?" said Skippy, breaking the silence. "I never knew we were getting so many buildings up before. Don't they make you think of a lot of ribs, sort of skeletons, like?"

"How can they be skeletons when they're only just

bein' built?" argued Barrelhead. "If they were dying, then I'd say they was skeletons."

"Well, I don't know—they seem like skeletons to me," continued Skippy. "Maybe 'cause we're up here, I don't know. Say! Remember when we used to play around there in the woods, and you used to be an Indian and I was George Washington at Valley Forge? Gee, I can remember how you usta run behind a tree and shoot your bow and arrow. And now we can't any more, 'cause they're startin' to build a row of houses."

"Yeh, but look over this way," Barrelhead pointed to a patch of woods and open fields. "Gee, I'd hate to play Indians around the Anderson farm at night. Gee, imagine going around *there* at night. You could go on and on and never find your way back around there."

"Ho, I went down there late at night, and I didn't think nothin' of it," boasted Skippy. "Remember the time Freddie Hopkins had his party? Well, I took that girl Ada home, and I didn't think nothin' of sittin' on a tombstone and smokin' the old corn silk."

"Wasn't you afraid o' nothin'?"

"I was scared that somebody might tell my father I was smokin'," boasted Skippy and he gazed in the direction of the Anderson farm, lost in contemplation. "Say, I can see a light in Jim Lovering's milkhouse.

I bet he's up washing bottles. Gee, it must be lonely for a feller to live all alone like that with no family or nothin.'"

"Robbers could easily murder him in the middle of the night," shuddered Barrelhead.

"Nobody could lick Jim. No sir, not a whole gang of robbers!" defended Skippy. "Gee, I was riding with him yesterday and for no reason at all he gets sore. Gee, Barrelhead, I'd hate to have a feller like Jim after me, if I was a man. When his big hands close on the reins, them reins just look like shoestrings. Yes, sir, Jim could lick a whole gang o' robbers jest by lookin' at 'em with his eyes."

"He's certainly a terrible strong man, but I'd hate to see him get fresh to my father. One sock, and where would Jim be?"

"Picking up yer old man, I guess," said Skippy.

"Oh, is that so?" glared Barrelhead.

"Yes, that's so," retorted Skippy. "Do you want to make anything out of it?"

"Yes, I do, but not here," said Barrelhead, secretly hoping that the thing would be dropped when they reached the ground.

"You know, Barrelhead. . . ." Skippy paused to watch the vapor of his breath, "Jim says there's a man that wants to see me about somethin'. I don't know

what it is, but I know one thing. If he should so much as lay a hand on me, I think Jim'd kill him."

"Well, what did he say?" asked Barrelhead.

"He didn't say nothin', but I jest have a way of knowin', that's all."

"That reminds me," Barrelhead looked at the ground and announced in trembling tones, "I betcha if ya fell off here y'd die."

"Die! Killed, ya mean!" corrected Skippy, shuddering at the possibility. He continued in a more relishing voice: "I know a man who dropped off a house so hard his eyes dropped out, and not one little bone that didn't get breaked! No, sir! Not one little bone! Beleeve me! If I gotta go, let it be drownin'!"

"What's the matter with chloroform?" demanded Barrelhead, with the air of a mother whose child has been slighted.

"Yeh, chloroform—that's good, too," assented Skippy. He paused, then falteringly decided that it was time for him to depart: "Listen, Barrelhead," he suggested, "you shoot down the cellar and fetch up a ladder, while I mind the telescope."

"I got a better idea—you go down."

"I'd go down in a minute, only I'm not quick like you. Gee! when I think of how you kin race—just like a streak of tickled lightnin'. Not because you're

here, Barrelhead, but I always said: 'There ain't a man in this town what could beat Barrelhead in a race, if he once lets hisself out.'"

"You ain't no slouch yaself, Skip. Besides, you told the fellers different, 'cause I know, an' I ain't mentionin' no names."

"Well, I was just jealous then."

The night became darker, and lights in the houses vanished at more frequent intervals. Skippy was the first to speak.

"How did we ever get up here?" he trembled. "Do ya th-think we'll get down?"

"I'm too scared to try."

"All on account of that darned telescope. Ya can see more in an Easter egg," complained Skippy. "I wisht Sooky was here. He ain't afraid o' high places like this. Ya oughter see him hoppin' around an attic with hardly any floor under him. Why, you could see clear down to the cellar. It scared me just to look at him."

"What are ya bringin' that up now for?" shivered Barrelhead.

"An' now we're even higher than an attic," Skippy reminded.

This was too much for Barrelhead. The vapor of his breath wavered: "W-What'll we do?"

"It's your house. I thought you knew all that before we come up," said Skippy. "Remember I ain't Santy Claus."

"Oh, gee, I ripped me pants!" exclaimed Barrelhead.

"Well, as long as ya got that, it won't hurt to slide down and rest ya heels in the gutter. What's a couple o' splinters?"

"Yeh, a lot you care whether I take half the roof with me, an' get bristles where I oughta have pants."

"Are you insured, Barrelhead?"

"N-No."

"Tst! Tst! That's too bad. No insurance at all?"

"We got fire insurance," offered Barrelhead.

"A swell chance your old man'd have walkin' into a fire insurance company carryin' a skeleton under his arm."

"A-Are—yo-yo-you insured?" asked Barrelhead, gritting his teeth to steady his quivering lips.

"You betcha! Up to me eye teeth."

"Then that's all right, then. You don't have to worry about slidin' down to the gutter."

"No, it's got to be off me own house." Hurriedly, "Other houses don't count, the insurance man says. Gee, if this was my house," said Skippy, "I'd take the chance in a minute."

"It—it's aw-awful—fa-far to the gutter, though."

"That! Huh! You'll do that in no time. Come on! What, are ya nailed? Ready! Onea and a onea makes a twoa, and a onea and a twoa makes. . . ."

"Don't rush m-me!"

"What else is there to do?" argued Skippy. "It's your house, ain't it? A fine guest ya makin' outa me."

"Supp-supposin' I miss the gutter," chattered Barrelhead.

"Well, then I'll know it won't work, an' I'll have to stick aroun' until mornin'. No sense of two of us goin'. Somebody ought to be left to talk about it."

"Gee, I wisht I never seen the darn ad. 'Know the Universe!'"

"'Fathom the unknown.'" Skippy prompted.

"D-d-don't," pleaded Barrelhead.

Two tiny figures hugged the ridge of the house. They sat motionless, silhouetted against the moon. Neither dared to speak, as they gazed terror-stricken into endless space. The faint yipping of a dog sounded in the distance; then all was silence again. Each felt the roof rise slowly beneath him. Afraid to stir, they clutched the ridge as the house soared to the proportions of the Washington Monument. Skippy opened his mouth to speak, but his tongue stuffed it like a carpet brick. Only a wheezing sound came

from some unknown region of his throat; it sounded far away, as though somebody in another world were using him for a horn. Skippy gulped and pulled himself together. "I-if we was to drop offa here—an' mind ya I ain't sayin' that we will—but just supposin', though, I wonder if us'd have a double funeral?"

"Yuh—yuh—yuh—mee-mee—mean——"

"I—I think . . ." Skippy began to find his voice: "I think the choir'd hold out for two funerals, 'cause then they'd be more sure o' gettin' ten cents offa each of us. That's the pay for corpse singin'."

Barrelhead's spirits snapped as he beheld the vision of a long satin box. His sensitive nostrils were already filled with the odor of funeral lilies. Inhaling his breath in a treble gasp, he blurted a shout that split the stillness of the night:

"Papa! Papa! Help! Papa!"

A window sash shot up in the lighted library, and the head of the startled father leaned out, vainly trying to locate the repeated calls for help. Almost frantic, he called to the adjoining bushes, "Where are you? Where? Where?"

"On the roof, Papa. On the roof."

"The roof! Great God!" exclaimed the parent, and he leaned way out and peered up into the darkness: "How did you get up there?"

"I—I was out walkin'."

"Don't move until I get a ladder."

While the boys held their breath in frightful suspense, the two prongs of a ladder appeared over the gutter of the roof. A moment later Mr. Boynton's head popped up between them.

"Now catch this rope when I throw it and put the loop around the chimney," he ordered. "Then grab it very tightly and slowly come down to the ladder. There's nothing to worry about. Just do it by letting yourself down easy. Take your time; and whatever you do, don't slide. It's very, very easy." For the first time he noticed the other figure straddling the roof. "Who's that up there with you?"

"It's me," said Skippy.

"Who's 'me'?" asked Mr. Boynton.

"Skippy," said Barrelhead.

"H'm! I might have known," muttered Mr. Boynton.

When Barrelhead reached the ground, still clutching the telescope, his father swished it from his hand. He brought it across the frayed pants with such a resounding crunch that Skippy missed the six remaining rungs of the ladder and tumbled to the ground with a plump that sent his head between his legs.

"Didn't I tell you to keep that boy out of here? Didn't I?"

Skippy scrambled to his feet and crashed pell-mell through the bushes. Repeated whackings and shrieking in his wake gave impetus to a whizzing figure, swerving toward the only other light in town.

CHAPTER XVIII

"FELLERS! Fellers!" yelled Skippy, pouncing on the gang assembled in Marlowe's orchard. "Listen! Listen! We're going to have a baseball team 'n' uniforms 'n' everything for nothin'!"

"What do we have to sell now?" inquired Ray.

"That's funny, I never saw the ad," said Barrelhead.

"It's Mr. Prince. He's goin' to buy them outa his own pocket. Yes, sir! Outa his own pocket!" Skippy insisted.

"We ain't got a team!" came a chorus of voices.

"Let's us get one up!" Skippy shouted. "I was goin' to say let me be captain, because I'm good at that sort o' thing. Besides, who else is there?"

"Who else is there? Who else is there?" choked Ray. "There's me!"

"No! I'm the captain!" said Skippy. "It's all settled."

"Aw! You wanta be everything! Give somebody else a chance oncst in a while!"

"All right, I will give someone else a chance," agreed Skippy. "All those in favor of me as captain—say aye!"

"Aye!" ventured Somerset.

"To the contrary."

"NO! NOT MUCH YA DON'T! NOT ME! NOR ME! ME NEITHER!"

"Carried!" broke in Skippy. "The 'ayes' have it!"

"I'm goin' to pitch then!" announced Ray.

"Yes, Ray's goin' to pitch," agreed Skippy, "when I don't!"

"Where did you ever pitch?" yelled Ray.

"Where did I ever pitch?" Skippy tried to think of some place where he had pitched, but he was stumped. "Where did I ever pitch! Ho! Ho! That's rich, that is!"

"I'm goin' to catch, 'cause I held the swiftest Skippy's father could throw, 'n' I guess that's catchin'," boasted Sooky, "What say, fellers?"

"Listen, fellers!" shouted Skippy, trying to make himself heard above the din of voices, "Mr. Prince says we gotta call the team 'THE HONEYDALE REALTY COMPANY, INC.' B'leeve me! That's goin' to look wonderful on our shirts, an' we'll always be remembered as the ORIOLE A. C."

"A.C.—Athaletic Club!"

They all turned at the sound of a voice apart, and beheld the figure of Collar Button.

"Well, of all the nerve!" muttered Skippy, surveying the newcomer, who never lowered his eyes under the scrutiny of the entire gang. "Never mind him, fellers! We got a lot o' bizness to settle yet. After all, maybe it'd be better if we changed our club to the ORIOLE B. B. C."

"B. B. C.—Base Ball Club!"

"What the hell does he think we're holdin'—a spellin' bee?" demanded Skippy, thoroughly vexed. "Go over 'n' see what he wants, Sooky!"

Sooky's conversation with the intruder consisted mainly of listening. Collar Button emphasized his remarks by tapping his palm with an index finger, and even held Sooky by the lapels as he took a breath and started afresh. When Sooky finally broke away from him, he called after him: "Don't forget now!"

"He says he wants to be a member of the ORIOLES," said Sooky. "He says his name ain't Collar Button. It's Hecky 'n' he's very tough 'n' ain't scared o' man or beast."

"Don't forget, now!" prompted the voice.

"'N' he says he can play second base."

Fully aware that all eyes were now upon him, the candidate, desirous of showing himself to best ad-

vantage, spat continually between his teeth and screwed his face into scowls of toughness. He ended by balancing a stick everywhere but on his nose.

Sooky was flooded with questions: "Who is he? Where did he come from? Let's ask him over, huh?"

"What's the use o' askin' him over?" cautioned Sooky. "We'll only kick him out again!"

"Maybe we could give him the slip 'n' go in the barn," suggested Ray.

"That's sneaky 'n' besides it'd only hurt his feelings. No, I tell you. I'll go over 'n' paste him in the nose 'n' he'll leave by himself," proposed Skippy.

He rapped for order. "Fellers! Fellers! We gotta vote, remember. Them's the club rules. I'm goin' to give out little pieces o' paper for votin', 'n' remember, only one black ball to a man."

After the papers had been distributed and collected again, Skippy unfolded them and counted the returns.

"How they comin'?" queried Collar Button.

"All black balls!" answered Skippy.

"C'n you imagine!"

Skippy fixed him with a menacing stare, annoyed that the disgrace rested so lightly on the outsider's shoulders. He seemed to be entirely unaware of the completeness of the terrible insult. Skippy felt it was a slight to the ORIOLES, who had given of their time

so generously; and he addressed the newcomer between clicking teeth: "Ya didn't get in 'n' we don't want ya!" As if the other might still have some doubts as to the exact meaning, he ground out: "Black balled! That's what ya was!"

"Well, fellers, tomorrow's another day. Maybe after I c'n get in, huh, d'ya think—after?" returned Hecky. "What say, fellers?"

They answered with a shower of stones, but, apparently accustomed to such experiences, Hecky was soon out of range.

When so hoarse that he could no longer be heard above the voice of his listeners, Skippy set out for home, accompanied by Sooky and Somerset.

"Well, fellers," advised Skippy, "from now on we gotta start trainin'. Lots of sleep. 'N' we're goin' to get up a committee to call on the teacher to cut out the home work, 'cause time is too much important."

"I'm chairman!" interrupted Somerset.

"No, I'm chairman," corrected Skippy, "but you and Sooky c'n ask her."

"'N' another thing!" continued Skippy, "I want that you guys should eat on a training table. No more coffee 'n' buns. No, sir! Just thick steaks 'n' mashed pertaters. Very rich puddings and only the top of the milk."

"You betcha!" agreed Sooky, turning into his house.

"You know what!" offered Somerset, breaking a long silence, "If we should ever need to raise money, Lizzie says she'll bake——"

"Skippy!" (Clap! Clap!) "Supper on the——"

"Comin'," answered Skippy on the run.

That night Skippy lay awake long after the parlor clock tinkled twelve. He juggled schedules that involved every major league. Sleep finally overtook him in the act of pitching a no-hit game in the World's Series.

. . . . . .

The next day Skippy brought his team over to the Honeydale Realty Office, situated in a clearing of woods back of town.

Mr. Prince advanced smiling, "Ah, welcome, Honeydales," he said, and he assumed the attitude of an incoming President of the United States as a line instantly formed in back of Skippy. One by one, each boy took his hand and solemnly chopped it once like a cleaver. As Skippy concluded his own share in the reception, he took his place next to Mr. Prince and nodded cordially at his own team-mates as they passed. Inspecting the long line with pompous dignity, his glance travelled to the last boy; as Skippy stared, he shifted his weight and rested a hand on his hip. The bent arm framed the face of Hecky. For an instant

their eyes met defiantly. As Skippy shortened the space between them, with head thrust forward, Hecky broke under the strain and withdrew to a comfortable distance.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Prince, "I've got the cards announcing the team all printed."

"Printed already! C'n you imagine!" they exclaimed, fixing him with admiring glances. Awestruck, they followed him into the office, where they beheld the piles of cards in the corner. Mr. Prince held a card before them like a magician displaying the missing ace of spades before a bewildered audience. Their eyes caressed the lurid type.

"What'd I tell ya?" proudly asked Skippy.

"Gee! We're in print!" gasped Ray.

"I'd like to take one home 'n' show Lizzie'n maybe she'll bake a . . ." Skippy stepped on Somerset's toe before he finished.

"Why certainly, take one home!" said Mr. Prince, overhearing the remark. "The fact is, I had them printed just for that purpose. I want you boys to show your fathers and mothers just what kind of a team you fellows are on. Then your friends will want to know about your games. For this reason, I'd suggest that you take these cards and give them out to all the people in Morrisville. Not to the children, mind you. Ring the bells and present them to the mothers and fathers. I certainly hope you won't scatter them around the streets," and Mr. Prince seemed hurt at the possibility.

"Why, the idea! Leave them on the streets after all the trouble Mr. Prince took to have them printed?" Skippy glared at his team-mates, then turned reassuringly to the agent, "Not much, we won't, Mr. Prince. We'll give them to every house, yes, sir!"

"You betcha!" came the chorus of voices.

Mr. Prince seemed pleased. "I'll let Skippy divide them among the boys," he suggested.

"I'll take some," said Hecky.

"Get out before we throw ya out!" warned Skippy.

Thus cautioned, Hecky contented himself with watching Skippy divide the cards in lots.

"Ya give Sooky more'n ya give me," whimpered Ray.

"He didn't, neither!" answered Sooky.

"Hey, come back here, Somerset! You can't go first! I'm captain!" shouted Skippy.

As the crowd turned and rushed toward town, the solitary figure of Hecky stayed for a brief moment undecided, then, sucked in by the stampede, he galloped in their wake.

"Gee! They don't come no better'n Mr. Prince," cried Barrelhead, as they ran.

"You betcha!" came the chorus.

"'N' him thinkin' we'd throw 'em away!" suggested Ray.

"C'n you imagine!" came the chorus.

"I wisht I had him for a father!" panted Sooky.

"Me, too!" agreed Somerset.

"You betcha!" they cried.

"Well, if I didn't have my own father, d'ya know who I'd want?" asked Skippy.

"Mr. Prince!" came the chorus.

"Yes, sir!" warmly. "Mr. Prince!"

"I'd rather have Santy Claus!" shouted Hecky, from the rear.

"Jealous is as jealous does!" whispered Skippy out of the corner of his mouth.

Hecky paused, and flapped a hand behind his ear. Somehow he felt that they were talking about him.

"Well, fellers, here's the town," said Skippy. "Now when I count three. . . . One! Two! . . . Hey, Somerset! Come back here, d'ya hear! . . . Stop him, fellers——"

The team was lost in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER XIX

"MAMMA, I just got an invitation to Sooky's party. Look!" Skippy placed the thumbed leaf of a notebook in his mother's hand, and straddled the arm of her chair as she read:

> "Master skippy you are invited to attend a surprise party on my mothur and bring a chawklet lare cake and meet at Krausmeyer's store at 7 aklok. Oh Boy. don't forget Krausmeyer's at 7 aklok. Ill be ther and oblige Sooky"

"You'll let me go, won't ya, Ma? She's a widder 'n' it's her first birthday party, Ma. C'n I go 'n' have fifteen cents for a cake, please, Ma?"

Feeling the vibrations of Skippy's arm around her neck, Mrs. Skinner nodded approval and pressed fifteen cents in his warm, eager palm. Not until the last patter of his feet died in the distance did she attempt to thread her needle.

Within a few minutes Skippy was at the baker's, running his eyes over the assortment of chocolate layer cakes.

"How much, Mr. Faber?" he asked.

"Two layers—fifteen! Three layers—twenty-five!"

Beside the fifteen cents in Skippy's pocket was a dime that he was carefully nursing for recess the following day. Clutching it with thumb and second finger, the nail of his forefinger revolved it notch by notch, while his eye became level with the counter. Peering up from this position, he realized how much the three-layer cake towered above the others. Jerking the twenty-five cents out of his pocket he banged it on the counter, and pointed to the three layers: "Shoot the works, Mr. Faber!"

Promptly on the hour he arrived at the meeting place and met Sooky. "Well," he called out, "Where's the crowd?"

"They ain't goin' to be no crowd! Nobody showed up!" answered Sooky, turtling into a coat three sizes too large.

"I'm here, ain't I?" challenged Skippy.

"Oh, yes! You're here!"

"What's the matter with me?" cried Skippy, his eyes flashing. "Go 'head! Say it!"

"They ain't nothin' the matter with you, Skip. You know me. I just ain't meself maybe. I dunno," replied Sooky gloomily. "'N' me usin' up a whole copybook for invitations. For what, I ask it?"

"Oh! I betcha they'll all be along yet," consoled Skippy.

"No, I went around 'n asked everybody 'n they said, 'No, they dasn't!' without s'much as battin' an eye. 'N' my mother's birthday, too!" Sooky gulped. "'N' when I first got here I thought there'd be a crowd yellin' like sixty."

"Ya Hoo! Yally Hoo! Yow!" shouted Skippy, but this outbreak failed to cheer his downcast companion. "Tell ya what let's do!" suggested Skippy. "We'll go 'round and bust a few windows. It might make ya feel better."

"What good'll that do?"

"What good'll it do? What good? It'll learn 'em better than to turn down your invitations next time, I'll betcha! 'N' besides, it might make 'em come."

While Sooky was pondering over the suggestion Skippy went on enthusiastically: "Yes! 'N' if it'll make ya feel better I'll go in and roll cobblestones over Krausmeyer's floor. Right under his very nose, no less! Yes, sir! That's the kind of guy I am!"

"You're a very real friend, Skip!" said Sooky, fixing him with wistful eyes.

"If I was any realer they'd be pastin' my picture up in church winders. Why, I——"

"Oh, I see you bring a cake. That's nice! But I

don't suppose that's a chawklet cake now, though, I don't suppose, huh?"

"Do I look like the kind of a guy what wouldn't bring a chawklet cake when he's asked? Answer me that!"

"C'n you imagine—a chawklet cake! 'N' from Faber's!"

"He tried to pass off a faded one on me, but I sez, 'None o' that, Mr. Faber. This is the one I pointed at.' Oh, wait'll you see it!"

After running a forefinger through the paper, Sooky gurgled, "Oh, boy! Wait'll she sees that! All I could buy was five cents' worth o' peanuts—ya know it took all I saved to buy Mom another apron."

So happy was he over the turn his party had taken that Sooky could wait no longer, and they started on their way. When they reached the stoop, Sooky breathed in Skippy's ear: "Now to do this thing right we gotta have both outer doors open. Maybe it'll work hard, but tonight I'm goin' to do everything up right."

After straining and pulling, the door finally gave; and with shouts of joy Sooky rushed headlong at his mother, brandishing peanuts and apron before her eyes. With a mighty cry of "Surprise!" he pointed to the open doors.

She gazed startled in the indicated direction. Sil-

houetted against the night, Skippy advanced, all radiance, with his layer cake.

Sooky closed the doors.

. . . . . .

On his way home from the party, Skippy passed the bakery, its door closed and its lights extinguished for the night. Looking up at the stars, he thrust his hands in his empty pockets and wondered why he whistled so happily.

CHAPTER XX

"Good morning!" said Hecky briskly. "May I have a word with you, Mr. Skippy?"

"Huh . . . wha's 'at. . . ?" replied Skippy drowsily. He snuggled deeper into the covers. "—'Tain' eigh' clock."

"It's about the team," cried Hecky, giving him another roll. "I was wondering about second base, could I, maybe—that's to say, after, maybe, huh, not now but after, if ya——"

"How'd you ever get up here . . . in my very room!" gasped Skippy, now fully awake.

"The door was open 'n I——"

" 'The door was open 'n' I—' " mimicked Skippy. In a threatening tone he continued, " 'G'wan home! Before I sock ya with this!" and he groped for a shoe.

"I used to play second base on the Magnolias," chirped Hecky, ducking behind the door and holding the knob in case of accident. "I guess you heard o' them, I guess! I guess!"

"I suppose ya think ya goin' to ring in on a uniform off'n the Honeydales, don't cha?" Skippy threatened.

"Well, now that ya should happen to mention it, I *am* easy to fit," Hecky replied, slackening his grasp of the knob.

"Yeh, well I wish ya'd go out and get measured for some tar 'n' feathers."

"As I was sayin', the Magnolias asted me to come back to the ole bag again. S'help me if I wasn't begged off'n to come. 'N what d'ya think I said——"

"Come out 'n tell me!" syruped Skippy, thumbing a shoe.

"I said the Honeydales was weak on second 'n——"

"You must come out!" invited Skippy, reaching for another shoe.

"Now c'n I play second base, d'ya think, maybe?" beseeched Hecky.

"Ya went around to Mr. Prince yesterday 'n said we made a barn fire of all them cards he give us, didn't cha!" Hearing no answer Skippy continued, "'N told him we couldn't be trusted with no unee-orms, didn't cha!" He peered dangerously through the crack of the door. "'N ya said we was goin' to sell 'em an' keep the money! Didn't cha- DIDN'T CHA?"

"Oh, that," answered Hecky.

"Yes, that!" retorted Skippy. "Now you get outa here!" And he tried to wrest the door from Hecky's death grip.

"Skippy, what's all that noise up there?"

"N-nothin', ma, I'm just gettin' dressed." Turning to the crack, he muttered, "Breakin' up a home, ain't cha!"

"No, I ain't! I only asted to play second base—a guy what can play."

"'N if I let ya play, will ya come out?" Skippy asked.

"Y-Yes," replied Hecky suspiciously.

"All right, then, you c'n play second base," conceded Skippy.

"Yeh, I know that one! Then ya say 'not' under ya breath. Oh, I ain't to be took in like that!" answered Hecky, warily.

"Watch through the crack in the door 'n' I'll leave me mouth open. Now watch! You can play second base."

For a full minute Hecky studied the open mouth through the door. "Now say, 'Honest,' " he demanded.

"Honest!"

The door slowly opened, and Hecky cautiously emerged from his corner.

"Second base on the Magnolias!" howled Skippy,

barely missing the head of the visitor with a flying shoe.

"Mrs. Skinner! Mrs. Skinner!" shouted Hecky, ducking under the bed in terror.

"Shhh!" cautioned Skippy.

"Skippy, who was that caliing?" queried the mother from the foot of the stairs.

"It's Hecky, ma. He just wanted to see me about somethin'. He's just goin' now," answered Skippy. He turned to Hecky. "Well, old man, ya'll have to go now, 'cause I gotta get off to school."

Wondering what it was all about, Hecky allowed himself to be ushered down the stairs to the door, as Skippy remarked, in loud tones, "S'long, old man, see ya at school."

"You betcha!" replied Hecky.

"Beetle!" hissed Skippy, poking his head out the front door.

In ten minutes Skippy had dressed and breakfasted. "I'm glad this is the last week of school, yes sir," he sighed. "No more for three months."

"Do you think you'll be promoted?" anxiously asked his mother.

"I know I will."

"Nobody knows until the last day," corrected Mrs. Skinner.

"But I know. Sooky ought to know. He got kept in and he peeked at the list."

"That wasn't fair," advised the mother, greatly relieved.

Feeling that the conversation was taking a dangerous turn Skippy pecked his mother's cheek and sailed away. Meeting Sooky in the school yard he greeted him with a friendly slap. To his astonishment, Sooky merely looked away.

"What's up?" asked Skippy.

"Yeh, what's up! You know what's up!" replied Sooky, with averted eyes.

"Hey! What's eatin' ya?" puzzled Skippy.

"Maybe ya don't think I heard that ya went around slittin' me up the back," Sooky shot out. "Belittlin' . . . that's what ya was. . . ."

"*I* did? *Me?* G'wan, ya full o' canaries!"

"Yeh, is that so! Well, I guess I don't have to play second base on the Honeydales, when I ain't wanted, I guess, I guess," returned Sooky.

"Who said ya couldn't play second base, I'd like to know?"

"You did—ya told Hecky 'n he told me."

"I never did!" bellowed Skippy. His eyes suddenly lighted on Hecky, who was drinking in the scene benignly. Turning to Sooky, Skippy whispered: "Now

ya c'n see who's tellin' the truth." He advanced on Hecky with blazing eyes: "Did ya tell Sooky I said he couldn't play second base? DID YA?"

"Miss Larkin! Miss Larkin!" yelled Hecky, backing toward the door.

"I guess ya know now who's a back slitter!" warned Skippy, returning to the side of his friend.

"C'n you imagine!" Sooky gasped.

CHAPTER XXI

"WELL, I suppose ya heard I got promoted," said Skippy, edging towards his father engrossed in the paper.

"So you told me at the station and at supper," reassured Mr. Skinner. "That's fine!"

"Yap! Got promoted!" repeated Skippy, tracing the carving on the arm of the rocker.

"Well, that's certainly very fine," the father agreed wearily.

"'N if I got left back, I'd o' caught it, I betcha. But promoted, huh, what's that! 'Course maybe I don't go bragging, that's why. If ya could have seen the crowd that got left back, 'n after me workin' so hard. . . . It don't seem fair."

"What doesn't seem fair?" asked his father, glancing over his glasses.

"Workin' the way I do 'n nobody cares!" replied Skippy. "Oh, but other fathers do. I just wisht you'd see how Barrelhead's father took it. Why, Barrelhead's pockets were full o' money. Yes, sir! Full!

He showed it to all the fellers, but everybody had somethin' give to 'em. One feller in our class says his father's goin' to give him a solid gold watch for bein' promoted. Yes sir! Solid gold! Then they asked me what I was gettin' 'n' I just filled up——"

"Filled up?" queried the father.

"Yeh, bust down, er . . . sorta . . . ah, you know!" Skippy searched every part of his father's face narrowly.

"Well . . ." Mr. Skinner deliberated a long time, rattling keys in his pocket. "Well . . . just to show my appreciation . . ." Skippy swivelled back and forth, laughing sillily. His father continued: "I'm going to let you have full charge of the garden this summer, weeding and mowing the lawn."

Skippy stared, dumbfounded. "So that's the kind of a father you is, is it? 'N that's the kind of a father I've been livin' with all these years!" With rising indignation he challenged: " 'N with the money you're makin'——"

"Say, do you go outside telling people what I make?" quickly interrupted his father.

"Oooh! I never did!" maintained Skippy.

"Don't yell, you're not out on the street."

"I never repeat things outside," continued Skippy, "any more."

"Well, because you've been promoted and you're so good, I'm going to give you this," and Mr. Skinner placed a brand new half dollar in his son's hand.

"Gee! Fifty cents!" exclaimed Skippy. "Just when I need it most. I can't wait for tomorrow. Pop, what time do you get up?"

"Seven o'clock."

"Will ya call me then, huh, papa? Will ya, at seven, call me?" pleaded Skippy.

"Sure, but why so early?"

"Didn't I tell ya? Oh, gee! Wait till ya hear it! Mr. Prince is going to take us all down to the city so we can be measured for baseball uneeforms."

"Who's going to pay for these uniforms?" asked his father.

"Mr. Prince, yes, sir, out of his own pocket."

"Hm!" Mr. Skinner reflected. "Well, you'd better get to bed if you want to get up at seven." As Skippy turned, his father bent the tousled head in a half Nelson.

"Oh, so it's fight you're lookin' for, huh? Do ya want to know how I'd break that? I'd just——"

"Stop! It's too late to wrestle," cautioned his father. "No, here's the way to break the half Nelson. Now run along. Good night."

"Good night!" answered Skippy, and ascended the

stairs, laughing at his own imitation of a bandy-legged man.

When Skippy awoke, the sun's slanting rays were pouring through the window. Alarmed, he sprang out of bed and ran to his father's room.

"Pop! Pop!" he cried, "Have ya gone, pop?"

"Huh . . . what's 'at . . . ?"

"Nothin', pop, it's all right. I just thought ya forgot to call me," replied Skippy. He listened as the parlor clock tinkled six, then roamed around his room, wondering how to pass the time. His eye lit on his bean-shooter sticking out of a pocket; seizing it, with the generous amount of pebbles he carried for just such emergencies, he went to the open window and sprayed the back fence at will. A ricochet clinked a bottle somewhere in the long grass. Then a window raised next door.

"What the hell do you think this is—Fourth of July?" The voice of the neighbor seemed to echo throughout the town.

Skippy, about to flip again, stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe. He heard the sash of his father's window raised, "What's happened?"

"Oh, I just thought I heard those cats in the back. Certainly a lovely day."

"Beautiful!" yawned Mr. Skinner. "Certainly done a lot for your garden, this weather."

"Well, guess you're right," returned the other, "if I do say it myself. Suppose you'll be goin' down on the eight ten."

"Uh huh. See you in the smoker." And the windows closed.

Things like this continually sent the neighbors up in Skippy's estimation. Hiding the bean-shooter, he contented himself by waiting over the open pages of "Treasure Island." Tiring of the printed pages, he attempted to read backward; but the story became so utterly senseless that he turned to the author's picture on the frontispiece, and regarded it with disgust.

Restless, he moved around noisily. When this failed to wake up the household, he repaired to the bathroom and gargled until everybody found sleep impossible. At the sound of his father's yawn, he knocked at the door.

"Seven-thirty, Papa; better not be late for work."

"How do you know it's seven-thirty?" answered his father.

"'Cause I heard the roosters crow hours ago."

To his great delight, Skippy heard his mother moving around down in the kitchen. Without waiting an-

other second he hopped the banisters, leaving his father to shift for himself. As he prepared to leave the house after a hasty breakfast, he met his father descending the stairs.

"Gee, Pop! You just gettin' up?" he cried.

Incredible though it was, Skippy could ponder over it no longer. With all the speed he could muster, he burst toward the station. As he neared this, shouts met his ears. The platform was lined with friends.

"Hurry! Hurry!" they screamed.

Breathless with running, Skippy put everything into a final spurt.

"What's keepin' ya?" yelled Sooky.

"I knew ya'd oversleep," called Ray.

With heart pumping violently Skippy mingled with his friends. They did nothing but shower him with reproaches, particularly those who had just regained their own wind. The others were still panting.

"Well, we're all here, I take notice," said Skippy. "What time is it?"

"Ten minutes after seven—or is it eight?" Somerset answered.

"Well, fellers, how about a little game of tag?" suggested Skippy, tagging Ray.

The fact that the station was half crowded with commuters gave the game an added touch of color. By

dodging in and out of the crowd, the entire team managed to evade Ray. The taunting shouts of Skippy, rising above the others, spurred Ray to redoubled efforts, and he spurted for Skippy. Squirming and shouting, Skippy came within an inch of being tagged. He only saved himself by jostling a man, sending him headlong off the platform.

"Look here, young man! That's enough!" Skippy looked up into the face of his father. "Look at your tie, and that suit! Why, it isn't even eight o'clock. What time did this man say he'd be here?"

"He says we should be in time for the nine forty-five," replied Skippy. "'N we didn't come none too soon because—Hey! Who told you to come?"

Mr. Skinner turned and beheld a small boy, hat in hand, gazing wistfully into Skippy's face.

"Please, Mr. Skippy, c'n I have a word with you," said Hecky, with a glance at the father, "Alone?"

Smiling, Mr. Skinner kissed Skippy and sauntered over to his neighbor, engrossed in a seed catalogue.

"Wasn't ya told ya couldn't play on the team!" glowered Skippy.

"Then ya won't take me to the city?"

"No, we won't take ya to the city!" mimicked Skippy.

"Maybe if I told ya the drag I got," and putting

his hand to his mouth, Hecky whispered, "with the cops!"

"The cops better not start nothin' with this gang!" cautioned the leader, returning to the assembled team. Hecky looked on from a distance and wondered what the whispering was about.

Skippy waited for some time after his father's train had gone; then he produced a baseball and proceeded to toss it around. However, it was not long before it passed through Mr. Hopkin's paper as he was about to turn the pages. This put a stop to the game. Although Skippy felt that the fault lay entirely with the lawyer, he kept it to himself and listened in silence. Greatly subdued, the team began to nibble their lunches, and in hushed voices cracked riddles.

When the station was finally clear, Skippy suggested, "Listen, fellers. Soon as Mr. Prince comes we want to bust out 'n' cheer."

"You betcha!" came the hearty chorus.

"The first one who sees him comin' only has to tip me off 'n' I'll count three, and then we'll let her rip. But, remember, not until I count three."

"Three cheers for Mr. Prince! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" shouted Hecky.

They turned, and to their utter dismay beheld Mr. Prince approaching but a few yards away.

"Good morning, Honeydales. Everybody here?" asked Mr. Prince, testing the point of a small horizontal moustache.

"Yes, sir!" they replied in chorus.

"Ah! I see you all brought lunches. That's right. Only I wouldn't eat now, boys."

"No, sir!"

"I brought some circulars along because I knew the Honeydales would want to give them out on the train. We want to have a good crowd at the Honeydale games."

"Now, ain't that smart," whispered Skippy. "We'd never thought of that."

"Always thinking of us, that's what he is," added Ray.

"A gent what *is* a gent!" put in Somerset.

"I want the Honeydales to gather around and I'll give you all instructions."

Skippy felt a steady tug at his sleeve. "Please, Mr. Skippy, c'n I go, c'n I, huh, after? C'n I play second base, after?" pleaded Hecky.

"No, ya can't go 'n' ya can't play second base!" howled Skippy, using a forefinger to emphasize the point.

"Not even never?" asked Hecky.

"Not never!" rejoined Skippy.

"Maybe after?" It was uttered more in the nature of a prayer than a question.

"No!" Skippy's answer gave no room for hope.

"Huh, who wants to be on your rotten ole team!" jeered Hecky.

As the train pulled into the station, the team pushed and shoved to get on board, and the air was filled with shouts and cat calls. Hecky watched them scramble to their seats and saw them line the windows. With the deafening chugs of the moving train, Hecky faced them squarely, sticking out his tongue as far as it would reach. He stood and faced them while the train slowly passed; with fingers to his nose, his eyes followed the tracks until the smoke died in the distance. Even then, as the little shoulders shook, Hecky thought he was laughing.

CHAPTER XXII

As the days following the trip to the city dragged by, Skippy and his Honeydales waited for the arrival of the uniforms. The freight from every train was inspected thoroughly, and even crated bathtubs were pried until every board was loosened. The contents of a crate marked "eggs" were only eggs after prying fingers had delved into the very yokes. Even passenger coaches were not free from the relentless search as the team scurried from one end to another, pausing to cast suspicious glances at everyone who carried a bundle. Skippy received many umbrella pokes for lifting the lids of baskets, and scratched knees from jumping off moving trains. The gang seldom left the station, even going so far as to bring their lunches. As for Hecky, he ate all his meals there.

"Look, fellers," said Skippy, "Here's Jim coming up the road."

"Ask him if he seen our uneeforms," Ray advised.

"He oughter know somethin' about them," added Sooky, "He's been here every day for the last week."

Skippy bracketed his mouth with grimy palms: "Hey, Jim, c'mere, will ya?"

Driving up to the platform, Jim got out of the wagon and assumed a listening attitude, thumbing his suspenders and letting them snap on a sweaty black shirt. "Ya see, Jim," explained Skippy, "we go down and pick out the uneeforms, see, Jim? 'N' all what was to be done more was to sew 'Honeydale' on the shirts. Now, just what do you suppose is keepin' them all this time?"

Jim sucked a tooth, then reached in a back pocket and drew out a plug of tobacco. He zigzagged this back and forth until a lump bulged in his cheek, and rotated it for some minutes thoughtfully: "Well . . ." Realizing that they were waiting for more of an answer, he added: "The way they're shootin' up houses in this ol' town, 'twouldn't supprise me if they's sendin' 'em by carrier pigeons." Here a fusillade of echoing hammers caught Jim's ear; squirting a cheekful of tobacco in the direction of the sound, he turned and ambled over to Bess with a slouching gait, unmindful of the fact that she had inched sinfully toward a choice overhanging elm. Without waiting for a signal, she trotted off guiltily as soon as Jim had caught up the reins. The team watched the milk wagon until it rattled in the distance.

Sooky broke the long silence. "Jim's a queer guy, don't ya think—sometimes, I mean?"

"He acted awful queer just now, 'n' for no reason," pondered Ray. "Why, ya'd think we done somethin'."

"D'ya s'pose it's 'cause he's never played ball hisself?" said a sudden voice behind them; surprised, the team turned and surveyed Hecky. He stood his ground, calmly picking his teeth.

"Beetle!" snapped Skippy.

"If ya ask me," said Somerset, "I'd say Jim is jealous of Mr. Prince."

"Green eyed, that's what he is!" Hecky confided.

"Green eyed or jealous, or everything, I'm for Jim!" flared Skippy, in a voice that always settled an argument.

At the sound of a distant whistle all eyes were fixed on an advancing train; and hopeful glances were exchanged as it slowly chugged into the station. The baggage car was full of freight. After spending a week at the station, they had learned that most of it would be dropped off at Morrisville. The team waited breathlessly as the baggage slid piece by piece from the cars. It seemed that pipe would never stop clanking on the wooden platform.

"Gee, we never used to get so much freight at this station before," said Skippy, "Only last year, remem-

ber, Barrelhead—when me 'n' you was studyin' engines?"

"Yeh. Then we only got farm tools, mostly."

"'N' not every train, either. Why, I never saw a bathtub without a house over it, before this year."

"Well, why don't other stations get more, I wonder," asked Sooky.

"Because they ain't got the money like we got," answered Skippy.

"I never seen any money in this town," Sooky returned.

"Ya don't have to see it—do ya, Ray?"

"You betcha ya don't," agreed Ray.

"Why, Ray c'n go into Krausmeyer's 'n' order anything in the whole store, 'n' Krausmeyer knows they're good for it. Ain't that right, Ray?"

"We ain't paid our bill in over a year, 'n' Krausmeyer never 's much as asks for it."

"Because he knows Ray's father is good for it—don't he, Ray?" said Skippy.

"Well, how can Krausmeyer live if someone doesn't pay once in a while?"

"Ya mustn't forget that Mrs. Barkenteen pays cash. 'N' o' course we pay by the week," informed Skippy, "sometimes."

"Mrs. Barkenteen told my mother that she went

into Krausmeyer's one time, 'n' saw him countin' whole stacks o' yellow bills out of a safe. Yellow bills, mind ya," put in Barrelhead.

"I don't believe it," said Skippy, "because Gussie never got a cent from him. No, sir, not s'much as one little penny. 'N' one time I swiped a sandwich from her at school 'n' there wasn't nothin' between it."

"Ya never told us that before."

"Well, because she told me not to—that's why," confessed Skippy.

The belching engine brought all conversation to a stop; and as soon as the train was away from the station, the freight passed through a most rigid inspection. Hearts sank as their fingers pried innumerable tubs, wash bowls, and furnace parts. There was nothing to do but depart. It was the five-thirty, and the next train was not due until six forty-five. To wait for this was out of the question, because all Morrisville ate at six o'clock; moreover, everybody was worn out after spending eight full hours watching trains come and go. Reluctantly the team trudged homeward.

Alone on the station, Hecky amused himself by spitting through the cracks on the platform, until his throat became parched. Then he entered the station,

opened the door of the stove and surveyed the empty interior for no apparent reason, except that he had done about everything else. Tiring of this, he drew out a pencil stub and made whiskers on advertisements that had already been decorated with penciled moustaches. Then he glanced up at the clock and tried to figure out the hour; but since he did not know how to tell time, he finally put it down as six-thirty and added ten minutes to make the train come quicker.

Hecky didn't know whether he dozed or not. As he sat propped against the station, he was startled by the sound of a distant whistle. When the train pulled into the station, a large box was dumped on the platform. After the commuters streamed from the station, leaving it bare, Hecky cautiously advanced to the box. He crept forward like an animal sniffing his prey, casting suspicious glances in every direction. When assured that he was quite alone, he drew a knife from his pocket and started hacking through a crack in the box. Soon he had splintered a hole large enough to allow a forefinger to wiggle in the interior.

He felt flannel, perhaps wool—Hecky couldn't be certain. Eagerly his fingers traced a letter sewed on the cloth. Hecky recognized an H. He hacked open another crack and his wiggling forefinger felt more cloth. He traced a D. It was enough. In his excite

ment, Hecky ran halfway down the platform. He suddenly stopped. It had just occurred to him that he had nothing to run about. Why should he spread the glad tidings? He wasn't on the team. He ran back and put his finger through the box again. Oh! to feel that gorgeous H. He pictured white uniforms with red stripes down the sides of the breeches, and a rainbow of letters across the shirt. How could he keep such a secret? And yet, how would he profit by telling everybody? Oh! why had he waited for the six forty-five? He returned to the box and wormed his fingers into the cloth.

"Never nothin' does our family get. Givin'! Always givin' we is," and Hecky raised his hands to his head and rocked it in lament: "No wonder we owes an' owes!"

Finally, after some hesitation, he started off on a run to tell Skippy, but as he neared the door he stopped. Skippy was on his pipe fence, unaware of his presence. Hecky stood contemplating. Whatever his thoughts were, he turned presently and walked home.

An hour later, Hecky, with a large box under his arm, rang the Skinner doorbell. He waited, whistling softly, hopefully. Skippy opened the door. Before he could say anything, Hecky rushed: "I brought these things over for you, Mr. Skippy."

"Since when are you Santa Claus?" said Skippy, glancing at the box eagerly.

"Now, what I was going to say was . . ." began Hecky hesitantly, "that if you let me play second base, I'd give you these things."

"Let's see them," said Skippy.

Hecky bent down and unfastened the string of the box, then lifted the lid. He drew out a pair of brown skates with a nickel spot on one of them.

"These has never been used," said Hecky.

"What rain barrel did you find them in?" asked Skippy. "Don't put them back, just leave them here. Now what else have you got?"

Hecky drew out the head of a hobby horse.

"Where's the rest of it?" demanded Skippy.

"The rest of it's home," said Hecky. "I've got to have something to sit on."

"Well, what else?"

Hecky showed him a chipped glassy.

"Where did you get that?" asked Skippy. "I think it's a glass eye."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Hecky. "I play marbles with it just the same."

"Anything else?" asked Skippy.

"Yes, one more thing," reaching down into the box. "My father's necktie." He saw that Skippy

was weakening. "And ya can keep that collar button I gave ya, just for good measure."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do." Skippy eyed the array of gifts. "You leave these things here with me, and I'll make out a contrak and sign you up with the Honeydales."

"When?"

"Tonight!" said Skippy.

"For second base?" asked Hecky, and he began to pile the things in the box.

"Well . . ." Skippy was sorely pushed for time, "I wanted to talk to you about that. You see, if you had only come around earlier. . . . But now I've got my team all fixed up, and ya know ya can't chuck a guy off just like that," and Skippy snapped his fingers. "So what I'm goin' to do is this." He paused. "I'm goin' to make you first assistant second baseman, and you're to have charge of carrying all the bats. I'm going to sign you up as official batsman. Now, nothing could be fairer than that."

"After, maybe, I can play second base, then?"

"Oh, after. Sure!"

"Well then, I'll come around for the contrak tomorrow morning, huh? Or maybe tonight—after, I mean?"

"No, tomorrow morning!" said Skippy.

"Tomorrow morning—after tonight." Hecky wanted to make it plain.

"Yeh, come early, because I have a big day before me. And leave these things here," said Skippy, and he pulled the box into the house. "Now, I must say 'Good night' to you, because my father wants me."

The door closed in Hecky's face. Without turning away, Hecky thought the transaction over. Then, as if the matter was still in an unsettled state, he rang the bell again. The door opened and Skippy's head appeared.

"Tomorrow morning, then?" Hecky inquired.

"Yeh, early."

Dawn streaked the sky and the first faint chirps of birds twitted through the elms. Jim Lovering's milk-wagon rattled up the street, but all Morrisville was asleep. Mr. Skinner awoke with a start. He sat bolt upright in bed. Yes, it was the door bell ringing steadily. Mr. Skinner, now wide awake, reached for his bathrobe and slippered down the front stairs, alarmed by the incessant ringing. For a moment he stopped midway as the parlor clock tinkled four. "Something's happened," he said; and rushed to the door. He peeked through the curtains and saw nothing. He unhooked the chain, turned the key, and opened the door slightly.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Me!" said a small voice.

Mr. Skinner opened the door. Hecky stood munching a piece of bread and butter.

"I'd like to see Mr. Skippy."

"Why, what's happened?" asked Mr. Skinner.

"He has a contrak for me 'n' told me to come around this morning for it."

"Well, you know," said Mr. Skinner, "morning goes up to forenoon, and Skippy is fast asleep. I wouldn't want to wake him now."

"When do you think he'll wake up?" asked Hecky.

"Oh, about eight o'clock. You better come for him at eight o'clock." Mr. Skinner pulled his bathrobe around his throat, conscious of the early morning chill.

"I'll wait," said Hecky.

"Well, good morning," said Mr. Skinner, and smiled in spite of himself as he closed the door.

Commuters, waiting for the early morning train to the city, gazed with wonderment at the commotion on the opposite platform. Boys ran up and down, and around in circles, bunking one another in their excitement. Shouts filled the air. Everybody was talking at once. They started to rip a board from a box and

were chased by the station agent; as soon as he returned to his telegraph instrument they clustered around again, like flies swarming over a lump of sugar.

"Mr. Skippy, can I have a word with you, after, I mean, can I, maybe?"

"You fellers can't rip them boards off like that!" yelled Skippy.

"My uneeform's not goin' to be left here," protested Sooky, prying the box.

"Look out o' my way," and Somerset braced his feet as he tugged a board.

"I'm tellin' ya! Leave them uneeforms alone!" ordered Skippy, dispersing the group right and left.

"Oh, Mr. Skippy, can I have a word with you—alone I mean?"

"I'll Mr. Skippy you with a sock in the nose!" retorted Skippy. "Leave that box alone, you fellers! Somerset, I'll fire you off the team, an' that goes for you, too, Barrelhead! Get out o' there, Sooky! Hey, Ray, give's a hand!"

"What's all this?" said Jim, scattering the team as he made his way to the box with swimming strokes.

The shouts increased, and they crowded around him, all talking at once. Jim listened and zigzagged a plug of tobacco in his teeth; he calmly rotated the lump in his cheek, assuming a listening attitude. When the

train pulled away Skippy screamed above the din, "I'm telling you I'm captain!" He shouted: "D'ya hear? Let me tell him."

The yelling only redoubled. Skippy tore off his coat, and with doubled fists he danced in a fighting attitude, his face red and eyes glaring.

"I'll lick the whole crowd, and if you don't believe it, come on and fight!"

They didn't hear him but they saw his eyes; and they drew back in silence, giving Skippy the platform.

"Ya see, Jim, it's this way," explained Skippy. "Here is these baseball uniforms rottin' on the station."

"I'll say they're rotten," said a voice behind them.

"Now, as I was saying," Skippy ignored the interruption, "The station agent says the Honeydale Realty Company's got to send for them 'n' Mr. Prince ain't in yet, 'cause we went down to see."

"When did you go down?" asked Jim.

"It was seven o'clock, wasn't it, fellows?" inquired Skippy.

"It was one minute after," said the voice.

"Aw, shut up! Who asked you?"

"All right then," the voice replied, "then you give me back them skates, and that horse's head, and that glassy, and my father's necktie and collar button."

The team looked at Skippy's red face. What was

this—bribery? Did Hecky think he could buy his way? As an election for a new baseball captain was about to take place, Skippy faced them squarely.

"Yes, I took them things from him," he said in a loud voice, "and he said they were gifts, and me thinking he was big-hearted I was going to give him a contrak and make him official batsman. Now I wouldn't take the gifts if I was blind in both eyes."

"Hurrah for our Captain!" said Sooky. They all cheered.

"What is this?—A G.A.R. reunion, or am I a milkman?" Jim squirted a cheekful of juice. "Let's take a look at that box," he added, walking over to it, and taking a mental note of its dimensions; "Shucks, I can easily get that in the wagon. I'll take it down for you."

"Would ya, Jim? Would ya really, now?" asked Skippy.

Jim answered by tipping the box. With a quick movement he hoisted it to his shoulder, and turned to Skippy: "You ride on the step, son, and tell me where you want it put."

As the milk-wagon rattled down the street it was followed by a howling mob. Hecky alone remained behind, figuring on the best possible way of regaining possession of his gifts. Mr. Prince, attracted by the

noise, was waiting at the door of the Realty Office as they approached.

"It's the uneeforms! The uneeforms! Mr. Prince, it's the uneeforms!"

The wagon stopped and Jim got off. As he wiggled the box onto his shoulder, Mr. Prince advanced, rubbing his highly-polished nails on the palm of his hand. "Well, my good man," he smiled at Jim, "how much do I owe you for this?"

"Where did you say you wanted this put, son?" Jim asked Skippy.

"Any place you say, Jim," said Skippy.

"Inside my office, please," Prince nodded.

Jim dumped the box outside the little house, turned without a word and went back to the wagon.

"Have a cigar—a good cigar," urged Mr. Prince.

Jim gathered the reins in his hands, and, ignoring the proffered cigar, he squirted tobacco juice from the side of the wagon nearest him. "Giddap!" he snapped.

The rest of the team swarmed around the box, waiting for Mr. Prince to open it but Skippy watched the wagon depart.

"Jim!" he called, and then ran after the milkman. "Hey, Jim!"

Jim recognized the voice and halted the wagon, as Skippy reached him breathless, "Th-thanks, J-Jim."

"That's all right," said Jim, rotating the lump in his cheek. "Between you and this nanny goat, I dunno where a feller's gonna get off." Bess wiggled her ears. "Now, you get back, son, 'cause I got a lot to do today."

As the wagon rattled off, Jim stuck his head once more out the side: "See ya 'gain—good luck."

CHAPTER XXIII

HEADED by Skippy, the team went to report to Mr. Prince, dressed in their new uniforms. Mr. Prince's generosity apparently knew no bounds. His sole interest he assured them again and again, was in the welfare of the team. He had been good enough to them, they thought, when he told them that they could wear their uniforms at all times; but his kindness surpassed itself when they had cautiously suggested taking them to the city. In fact, instead of raising any objection, he actually patted them on the back and offered to pay their carfare, and even handed them all a new round of the printed cards for distribution in city letter boxes and stores. In this way, he explained, they would be flooded by offers from city teams; although it was ridiculous to think that any city team would ever beat the Honeydales. Mr. Prince had smiled at the very thought, and carefully touched the ends of his waxed moustache.

"Now, my Honeydales," he had told them, "I want you to feel that each suit belongs to the player, just as if it were his very own. And incidentally," he had

suggested casually, "it might be an excellent thing for the Honeydales if you stood on the station platform when the trains go by. Just let these people that pass through this town see that the Honeydales are a real, live bunch!"

As the team repaired to the Honeydale Real Estate office they were especially loud in their praises of Mr. Prince.

"You could have knocked me dead," said Skippy, "when I saw all the lettering. I thought we was only going to have 'Honeydales' on the shirt, and there Mr. Prince goes and spends all that extra money putting on our addresses."

"I got more on mine than any of ya," said Sooky.

"Turn around," said Skippy. "Let me see what yours says on the back." He read aloud: "'$5 DOWN, $1 A MONTH' . . . Pull your pants up tight." Skippy squatted lower: "'BUYS A LOT IN HONEYDALE!'"

"Let me read yours," said Sooky. "Turn around." He squinted at the back of Skippy's shirt: "'OWN YOUR OWN HOME.'"

"Do you want me to hoist my pants?" asked Skippy.

"No, I can read it," said Sooky: "'WHY PAY RENT?' Oh, look at all that Barrelhead has on him!"

They all read in chorus: "'CALL US UP. TELEPHONE 6923-W MORRISVILLE.'"

"What does Somerset's suit say?" asked Barrelhead.

"He had egg for breakfast," murmured Skippy.

This passed unnoticed in the general excitement as they read: "'HIGH LOCATION. FIVE MINUTES FROM STATION.'"

"Read mine," said Ray; and his team-mates chorused: "'SEE US BEFORE BUYING. WRITE FOR DETAILS.'"

"And look at all the stuff we've got on front of the shirts, too," said Skippy, sticking out his chest. They all followed his example. "'HONEYDALE ESTATES, INC.' And on our hats, too, it says: 'HONEYDALE, INC.'"

Hecky absorbed this scene at a distance. Little had he realized that suits could ever look so lovely. He would have given his right hand now to have a contract as official batsman. As he looked at the dazzling array of red letters on light grey uniforms, he was almost heart-broken. He could not think of a single insult, and he decided to go home. Perhaps, with the help of his father, he could think of something sufficiently belittling.

As the team neared the realty office, Skippy whispered to the players: "Now, don't forget. When I raise my hand, we'll give the Honeydale shout." All gathered around, and Skippy led the cheer:

"Rah, Rah, Rah! Sis Boom, Bah! Honeydale Estates, Inc.!"

Mr. Prince came from the office beaming: "Well, I'm glad to see my little Honeydales have such fine spirit. That's the stuff, boys. Good old American pep. Who made up that yell?"

"Skippy did!" said Sooky.

"Well," said Mr. Prince, "I didn't know we had a Longfellow in our midst." Skippy blushed, for Longfellow was his favorite poet.

"Now, boys," continued Mr. Prince, suavely, "I thought you would be pleased to hear that I have gotten a photographer to take your pictures."

"Gee, can you imagine?"

"Oh, Mr. Bradley!" called Mr. Prince. "Ho, Bradley!"

Mr. Bradley emerged from the realty office. "Yes, Mr. Prince?"

"Here are all my Honeydales in a body now," said Mr. Prince. "Did you ever see such a fine baseball team?"

"No, I must say I never did." The photographer stroked his chin contemplatively. "Ah, yes," he added, "I see they have brought two bats with them."

"Yes sir, and we have a glove and a ball too," said Skippy.

"Now, boys," began Mr. Prince, "I have another surprise for you—a very great surprise. I want you to do all you can to make this picture an excellent one. Stick out your chests like real Honeydalers, because this photograph, mind you, your very picture. . . ." He paused impressively: ". . . is going to be used as the cover of the 'Honeydale Spring Catalogue.' "

For a moment, all they could do was stand and gasp. Their pictures on the cover of the spring catalogue, and in their brand new uniforms! It seemed almost unbelievable. Yet there was Mr. Prince; and the words had come from his very mouth. Skippy wanted to say something appropriate, but all he could do was gulp. The photographer broke the silence: "Now, Mr. Prince, if you'll just tell me where you want them grouped, I'll snap them."

"Well, I was thinking . . ." Mr. Prince felt the ends of his moustache with his thumb and forefinger, "Yes, I guess I'll have them in front of the Realty Office. Say, under that sign. What do you think, Mr. Bradley?"

"I can't think of a better place, Mr. Prince," agreed the photographer.

"All right, boys. Just gather around in front of that sign."

"This sign?" asked Somerset, pointing to the only

one in sight. " 'Buy Lots in Honeydale; the fastest growing development of the east. Five dollars down means five hundred dollars a year from now.' "

"Yes, that's the one," said Mr. Prince. "Now, my little Honeydales, make it snappy—a little American pep!"

They scrambled and clustered under the sign, pushing one another in their earnest desire to show Mr. Prince that they had plenty of American pep. The photographer stepped back and his eyes squinted at the group with the air of an old master. Cocking his head on the side, he sighted them over an extended thumb: "Er . . . ah . . . suppose you place the catcher's mitt in front of you. And perhaps it would be well to put the baseball . . . ah . . . did you say you had a baseball with you?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"Very well. Put the baseball in the middle of the mitt. . . . Wait! I forgot to say to cross the bats, and put the glove on top of the bats."

Mr. Bradley waited patiently; during the operation he squinted under a turned-down thumb. "Who's the cap——?"

"I am," said Skippy.

"Then you squat right in back of the glove and

bats." The photographer took a plumb line out of his pocket; when it had ceased swinging, he motioned until Skippy edged in place. "Now, two boys on the right of the captain and two on the left—wait! I want the four tallest boys to stand in the rear."

Mr. Prince sized the team up, and motioned to four of them. "All right," resumed Mr. Bradley. "Now, the other boys sit on each side of the captain."

After a little commotion the Honeydale team was ready for the picture. Everything seemed to be arranged to the satisfaction of the photographer. He ducked behind the camera, pulling the cloth over his head, "Er . . . that boy smiling—the one with the two teeth in front—just close your mouth. I don't want to take a picture of a vacant lot. This is a development company."

Mr. Prince chuckled, and the Honeydale team laughed heartily, thinking they saw the point. Underneath the photographer's canopy Mr. Bradley giggled until the cloth shook.

"All right, Mr. Bradley," called Mr. Prince. "Whenever you're ready."

As Mr. Bradley was about to press the bulb, he paused. A terrible frown had suddenly settled on the captain's face. He was about to remonstrate when

he felt a tug at his coat tail. Mr. Bradley lifted the cover in surprise; he turned and looked into the face of a small boy, standing cap in hand behind him.

"Mr. Picture-man, can I get in the picture, maybe? Can I, in the picture, get?" pleaded Hecky.

"Come, my little man, get back!" ordered Mr. Prince, and nodded again to the photographer: "All right, Mr. Bradley."

The team stared until their eyes watered. At last, the camera clicked. As soon as the picture was taken, the photographer folded up his canopy and squeezed his tripod.

"That will be all for today, boys," said Mr. Prince. "I think it would be a good idea to meet your fathers at the station, and surprise them with the new uniforms."

"When shall we begin to dig our diamond, Mr. Prince?" Skippy's arms swept over the acreage of Anderson farm land. "We'll put it any place you want."

"Well, yes . . ." Mr. Prince hesitated. "Yes, of course. But don't make anything elaborate, because I expect some changes. You see, we're going to break this up into streets . . . and then, again, I don't want you to soil your uniforms."

"Hear that, fellers?" cautioned Skippy. "I don't

want any of you fellers to wear your uniforms to dig in. I want you to be careful of them all the time." He spotted Somerset. "Been eatin' in your uniform, ain't ya? I seen the egg down the front."

"Gee, I hope that don't show in the photograph," moaned Ray.

"Lizzie says she'll get it out; it just happened that all the napkins was in the wash."

"Well, good-bye, boys," and Mr. Prince disappeared in the office.

"Good-bye, Mr. Prince," they all replied, as they turned toward the station.

"Can you imagine putting streets through old potato fields like them?" said Skippy. "I don't know what he's thinking of. The only thing that's ever been over here before was a plow."

"I don't think we ought to say anything about it at home," advised Ray, "because my father will laugh hisself sick. It wouldn't be fair to Mr. Prince, after all he's done for us."

"Then let's say nothin' about it," suggested Sooky. "What say, fellers?"

"Yeh, that's right," agreed Skippy. "I don't want you fellers to say anythin' about what Mr. Prince is goin' to do, even if it does sound silly to us."

"Y'know what I was thinkin'?" said Barrelhead. "I think we all oughta get together, all of us Honeydales, and give Mr. Prince a lovin' cup or somethin'."

"Or a pair of solid-gold, fourteen-carat cuff buttons——"

"You just keep solid-gold fourteen-carat eggs off'n that shirt front," commanded Skippy.

"Ain't he the big-hearted feller, though. Think of him givin' us uniforms 'n' everythin' for nothin'. Just imagine! Fer nothin'."

"All I got to say is," broke in Sooky, "that I never seen a kinder and lovabler man than Mr. Prince."

"You bet yuh!" they all agreed.

"And after puttin' our pictures on the Spring Catalogue, too," Skippy pointed out. "I think we all oughta get together an' do somethin'. But what, though? That's the question, fellers."

Somerset breathed close to Skippy's ear. Skippy mumbled: "All right, I'll see what they say."

"Listen, fellers," said Skippy, holding up his hand. "Somerset says that Lizzie'll make a cake."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Honeydale team had taken many trips to the city with Mr. Prince, delivering the Honeydale Spring Catalogue. These trips became so frequent that Skippy found little time to arrange any game schedule. Moreover, it was almost impossible to know where their diamond would be from one week to another. The team had laid out four diamonds so far; but each time they had found that stakes ran through a corner of the infield, or somewhere in the outfield, making it practically impossible to play. Whenever stakes were laid tractors would follow up, destroying all their work. If the team complained to Mr. Prince, he only listened with a smile and offered them another area.

"Now, what do ya know about that?" complained Skippy. "Here's a signpost in the pitcher's box."

"Do you think this visiting team'll mind?" asked Ray pointing to an approaching group.

"Maybe they'll think it's a hat rack," informed Somerset.

"Well, we got to play just the same, I guess." He

looked at the sign and scowled: "'Kensington Boulevard.'"

"What kind of a baseball diamond do ya call this?" asked the opposing captain. "What are ya goin' to have for bases—bowls of gold fish?"

"C'mon, play ball!" ordered the umpire.

It was somewhere around the seventh inning that a group of men appeared and looked on. This was the first time the Honeydale team had ever had an audience, and naturally, there was great excitement.

Skippy was in the pitcher's box; he began tapping on his glove, and from that moment on became a one-hand catcher. He was not alone. The whole team instantly became one-hand scoopers, and ran all over, chasing the ball. It was the eighth inning, and the score was 53 - 2 in favor of the visiting team.

Ray was catcher. He signalled to Skippy with two fingers on the catcher's mitt. Skippy wound up like a pitcher whose picture he had studied many times on the sporting page. The ball shot well out of range of Ray's glove. He glowered at Skippy, and then in the manner of a big leaguer sauntered to the pitcher's box: "Looky here, pitcher," he whispered, "I signalled for an indrop."

"With a left hander up?" Skippy spoke aloud for the benefit of his audience; for the Honeydale Dia-

mond had assumed the proportions of a big league field. Flags were waving on the grandstand and bands were playing. He heard cheering from every section of the field—cheers that were meant for him, because he was pitching a no-hit game and saving the day. It was for dear old Yale. Women were crying; old graduates, toughened old men, had tears in their eyes as they saw their star athlete holding up the name they loved so well. For a fleeting moment Skippy thought of the previous fall when he kicked an eighty-yard drop kick over the goal, saving another day. Yale owed him a debt of gratitude, he felt. The student body was singing, all for him.

"What about this left hander?" said Ray, who had just returned from Harvard.

"Just this," said Skippy, "I always fool the Southpaws with the little old outdrop."

"What's the sense of me signalling, then?"

"Come on, play ball, play ball!" called the rest of the team impatiently. "Let's go! Come on! Play ball! Play ball!"

As Skippy was about to wind up, he noticed a commotion among the group of men. He sent the ball squarely over the plate; it was met by a crack that sent it through Sooky's legs at second base. Waiting for the ball, he observed to his surprise that Hecky

was the center of the group's interest. He heard one of the men ask: "Where is he?" and Hecky answered: "He's waiting over at the office now." The men left the game in a body, and hurried toward the Honeydale Realty Office. As he watched them depart, Skippy realized for the first time that Jim was watching the game from the milk wagon.

"'Lo, Jim!" Skippy called. "Goin' up my way—after, I mean?"

"How soon is this game goin' to be over?"

"Any minute, now," answered Skippy. "I got all these batters tired out and they're fanning right and left."

"That must have been since I wore out my pencil, then."

Skippy signalled to Ray to come to the pitcher's box. He walked and met him half way.

"Say, listen, Ray," began Skippy. "Here it is the beginning of the ninth, and luck's been against us. It's sixty-nine to three in their favor, and I don't see how we're going to warm up enough to make sixty-seven runs in one inning. Even then, it might be just our luck to only tie the score. What do you say, we call it a day?"

"That's all right with me," replied Ray. "A ball hasn't hit my mitt since ya started pitchin'."

"All right, fellers," Skippy announced. "Let's call this a day. We're going to let you have the game, but next time we're going to wipe the field with ya."

"Oh, what a rotten bunch of players!" jeered Hecky.

"Always belittlin'. Never open yer mouth unless it's somethin' cuttin'," said Skippy, advancing threateningly. "Say, you! What's the idea of takin' away the audience?"

"I didn't take away the audience. Mr. Krausmeyer asked me to come over for them."

"I'd like to know what Mr. Krausmeyer's got to do with this team," rejoined Skippy.

"I guess Mr. Krausmeyer can tell you and your old Honeydales where to get off, if you knew what I do. But I ain't tellin' everythin' I know."

"Ah, you're full of balloon soup anyway." Skippy walked over to Jim. "S'long, fellers," he yelled, and hopped on the step.

As the milk-wagon bumped over the unfinished road, Skippy heard the voice of Hecky in the distance: "I-know-something-you-don't-know! You-don't-know! You-don't-know!"

"Come on, you'll be falling off that step," cautioned Jim, "unless you want to be measured for a harp."

"Some day I'm going to haul off and sock that guy in the nose," glowered Skippy, staring behind them.

"Besides, what's Krausmeyer comin' 'round an' spoilin' things for?"

"That's the best thing Krausmeyer does."

"Who are them men, anyway?" asked Skippy.

"They're salesmen, son," said Jim, "and they're out here to sell these lots, 'ceptin' all the corner ones. I guess somebody's got them sewed up already, without mentionin' any names."

"Who'd want to buy a property in a lot o' farm land? My father says it's too far from the station."

"Yeh," answered Jim, "but suppose I tell you they're thinkin' of puttin' a car line out here?"

"Gee, wouldn't that be swell!" exulted Skippy. "When will it be?"

"Oh, 'taint definite. Just talk so far; but it's comin'. Look at Morrisville. Folks didn't believe me when I said they'd be sidewalks. No, I was just talkin' through my hat, accordin' to them! But they think it's a great thing now that Elm Street is going to have a cement road."

"Oh, then I'm goin' to get a pair o' roller skates!" exclaimed Skippy.

"I feel as if I'm goin' through some other town, now, when I see the Telephone Company's new brick buildin' up where the old town hall used to be. Sixty years that old buildin' has stood there. When

war was declared 'tween the North and the South, that's where my dad enlisted. Yes, son, they was flags wavin' an' drums beatin' outside that old buildin' when the boys come marchin' home."

"Was there many come back, Jim?"

"Well, twenty-five went away, son, an' four come back."

"Did your father come back?"

"Yes, he came back, on a stretcher. The only thing that's left of the town hall now is a tablet with the names o' them that answered their country's call in '61. Now it's in that three-story brick buildin'. God Almighty! It looks like a diamond set in a pile o' manure."

"Gee, I thought the new buildin's better'n the old town hall, Jim. Look how high it is!"

"Yeh, an' the next thing to come is a brick buildin' for the fire department. An' then they'll have paid firemen, suckin' their thumbs all day an' prayin' for a fire."

"Well, they ain't so much hammerin' now as they used to was, Jim."

"There's no place to hammer," said Jim, glaring out of the milk wagon. "Four new streets this way, with houses slapped up against each other." Jim jerked his thumb in the opposite direction. "Six streets the

other way. God knows how many more they're goin' to add on to it, if things keep boomin' the way they has."

"Yeh, Jim," said Skippy, "but nothin' has been built on Elm Street."

"Yeh, that's where they been wise. Ya gotta give the devil his due. They was smart enough to hold that till the last. Golly, it gets me how the people in this town gets took in! In the last two months seven houses have been sold. They just need about two more an' it'll make a clear row. Hopkins had brains enough to hold out, but they won't let him stand in the way. Then it'll be Good Night."

"What d'ya mean, Jim, 'Good Night'?"

"'Cause they're goin' to put up a row o' stores, or I'll miss my guess."

"Then all I'd have to do is run right across the road to the store. Gee, that'd be a cinch. My father says he'd never move from here."

"Yes, but they ain't all like your father, Skippy. Soon as the 'tother side o' the street sees stores up, they'll collapse like a pack o' cards. I ain't been a chess player all my life for nothin'. They used to say at town meetin's that this was an H of a town; but it didn't take some people long to make a chess board out of it. So far it's been a lot o' fun for a couple o'

fellows to ride over the pawns an' get the jackasses out o' the way. But it won't be long before the two kings'll be after each other. An' I know who the winner'll be, 'cause he'll get the other fellow by tanglin' him up with a queen."

"Then he'll win, won't he, Jim?"

Jim chewed in silence, and then spat from the side of the wagon. "Well, he'll win that game. But another game, he may lose his own queen."

"Say, Jim, d'ya need me for anythin' this afternoon?"

"No, son. Here's your house. Ya better wash that face."

"Well, s'long, Jim," and Skippy hopped off.

Jim rode along, facing the setting sun. His eyes deepened and then sparkled with two dots of radiant gold. "An' the queen is yours to keep, once you get her with a bishop."

CHAPTER XXV

Mrs. Wayne had just been paid for sewing. Spearing her hat with her hatpin as she entered the door, she carefully placed it on the mantelpiece and crossed the room to the calendar, where she made notations in various squares of August. She turned the sheet to September and jotted several tiny memoranda.

She picked up her purse, and scattered twelve dollars on the red table cloth in a fan of singles. Her fingers swept over them like a magician about to perform a miracle. She pushed two bills aside, then gathered the rest and placed them under the faded yellow plush mantel cover. As she was about to pick up another from the table she paused, tapping a thimbled finger on her chin.

Mrs. Wayne gazed from the table to the mantel, and then her eyes sought the Bible. There were so many bills to be met. Here it was the last of August. The iceman would be around for his money; and yet she didn't want to ask Jim Lovering to wait. It was fully six weeks since she had paid him. No,

she would consult the calendar. She traced the jottings of August with a forefinger, and stood lost in thought while the nail of her thumb dug the crevices between her teeth.

Well, Krausmeyer would have to wait, she decided, and, picking up a bill, she flapped it with her fists, as if trying to see how far it would stretch. But would he? That was the annoying question, and she stood hesitating, unable to make up her mind. With a decisive gesture she gave the bill a final flap. Krausmeyer would have to wait. This was money to go toward a suit for Sooky. She caressed the bill in her hand tenderly, like a wounded bird.

She reached for the Bible and withdrew three worn dollar bills, compressed like faded rose petals. Unconsciously her eyes sought the open book as her fingers smoothed out the wrinkles of the bill: "Fear thou not; for I *am* with thee; be not dismayed; for I *am* thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

Mrs. Wayne closed the book firmly on five dollars. With a feeling of pride she removed her spectacles and placed them in their customary place over the shepherd's crook on the clock. As she turned away she glanced back at the face, and then frowned.

"Land sakes, just like me to forget to wind it." As she turned the key, she noticed the time: "Five after five. That's odd. It must have stopped when I came in." She tried to figure the time that had elapsed since the carpenters ceased hammering; at a guess, she set the clock at ten after five. Like all Morrisville, Mrs. Wayne found the hammer beat to be infallible, and time was set accordingly.

"Today is the first time that clock has stopped in years. Now I wonder—oh, well, this ain't gettin' supper."

She went to the kitchen, and putting on her apron busied herself starting a fire. What would she make? She thought of a rice pudding. She remembered that there was a cup of boiled rice, milk and eggs. But raisins? She opened the larder hopefully. Yes, there were raisins, too. Well, it wouldn't take long to get up a rice pudding. She took the package of raisins from the shelf. It would be a nice surprise for Sooky to see a pudding when he came home. She decided that she would not skimp on the raisins, and emptied half of the package in a bowl. It wasn't a rice pudding unless there were plenty of raisins, that was sure. There never was a boy so crazy about raisins. She smiled as she let the water run over them.

The clock struck the half hour. Any minute he would come. Well, the pudding was in the oven. She moved the simmering stew to the back of the stove and started to set the table. Any minute he would be in, now. The tea kettle started to boil. All she had to do was draw the tea. She paused, holding a spoon, as a child's steps approached. Must be Sooky now. No, it was some other boy—he had passed.

The clock struck six, and Mrs. Wayne went out on the porch to look up and down the street. He should have been here before this. Perhaps he was standing talking to some of his friends. All Morrisville ate at six, however; and he was generally in at five-thirty. She hastened back to the kitchen, fearful lest the pudding should burn. Opening the oven, she found that the pudding was done.

She took the hot pan in her apron, and placed it on the window sill to cool. He would be so happy when he saw that nice brown crust, and all the raisins sticking out. She wondered what was keeping him. Oh, he would come any minute now; but it would be nice if he would come right away. How restless it was, waiting for someone. Well, everything was ready. The kettle was seething; she emptied a cup

of cold water in it, and absently left the water running. She turned it off and turned the hot water on and washed her hands.

"What am I washing my hands for? That's the third time I did that. I wonder what could be keeping him?"

She dried her hands on the roller towel and looked out the window. It wouldn't hurt to put another cup of water on the geranium. When this was done, there was nothing left but to wait. Mrs. Wayne sought the rocker. She started to rock. Must be five after six. She got up and looked. Seven after six. Perhaps somebody had sent him on an errand. He might have a surprise for her—some new way of making money.

"Bless his heart . . . I wish he'd come."

She was about to sit back in the rocker when the sound of a stick rattling over the rickety picket fence arrested her move. Well, it was about time he came. The idea, keeping her waiting. She bustled around, poured the water on the tea and joyfully started toward the door, only to stop as she listened to the pattering feet going off in the distance.

"I could have sworn that was him." As if to excuse her depression she continued, "and anything I hate is boiled tea."

She sat in the rocker. Arising immediately, she paced back and forth, nervously biting a hang nail. If she only knew where he was.

Ambling around the table she polished her nails in the palm of her hand with unsteady jerks. At each turn she glanced uneasily at the clock. Twenty-five after six. Perhaps the Skinners had invited him to supper; but in such a case he had always let her know beforehand. She tried to think. Did he say anything about going any place when she saw him at breakfast? That *must* be it; the Skinners had invited him to supper. But he would have had time to let her know. It wouldn't take him five minutes. What a relief it would be if she only knew for sure. She went over the brief conversation of the morning. There wasn't much time to say anything during breakfast. She remembered that she told him there was some cold ham to make a sandwich. He would find milk in the ice box. "Oh, yes . . ." he had said, "don't worry about me, Ma. I'll be all right."

The clock struck the half hour. Again she sought the rocker, and forgot what she started for as she walked around it. "I'll be all right," she whispered, and attacked the hang nail. She suddenly remembered that the palm needed watering, and getting a pan of water went out on the porch. Her longing eyes

scanned the road up and down. Absently she returned to the kitchen with the full pan of water. Twenty-five minutes to seven. Pretty soon it would be dark.

She decided to wait no longer, and sat down to eat alone; but her appetite was gone. Taking a spoon she was about to delve into the pudding when her eyes rested on the empty bowl beside her. She tapped the table with empty spoon in unison with the ticking clock. Yes, he had stayed away before; but tonight seemed different. Seldom had she felt so lonely, so utterly alone. She would shake it off. She had used her eyes too much, that was it. She removed the plates. Returning to the table, she found she could not eat with the empty place opposite her. He might be in any minute. She replaced the dishes to show that she was ready for him. Bowing her head the mother said grace over a cup of boiled tea.

Mrs. Wayne gazed through the open window, conscious of the lengthening shadows. Already the crickets' increasing chirps, and the call of the whip-poor-will, announced approaching night. All outside seemed to echo some lament. She shook off the dreadful feeling by clearing the table. For the next fifteen minutes she feverishly put things to order that had already been put in their places.

Night was falling when Mrs. Wayne took her seat by the window, slowly rocked and waited; waited until complete darkness had fallen, and in complete darkness sat in the lonely house. A neighbor passed and thought he saw a face peering out into the night; perhaps it was only natural, after all, that the widow Wayne should save light.

"Land Sakes! I never thought!" exclaimed Mrs. Wayne. "He's going to camp at Marlowe's. Here I've been worrying all this time, too." And she rocked back and forth. "Oh, it's silly of me, I know, but I do hope he'll come and kiss me good night."

Greatly relieved, she got up and lit the lamp; she opened the Bible, and read until the clock struck nine. Yawningly she rose and put her glasses over the shepherd's crook of the clock.

She bolted the back door and locked the windows, leaving the front door unlatched. Going out on the porch she wandered up and down aimlessly, trying to make up her mind whether to go down to Marlowe's and see if everything were all right. Then she remembered the time that she had gone down before and found him asleep between Skippy and Ray. Of course, it was foolish of her to be so fidgety. Certainly no boy would walk a whole half mile to say

good night. But hereafter he should tell her when he intended to stay away.

It occurred to her to keep the lamp burning; but on second thought she decided not to, with oil at thirteen cents a gallon. She untied her apron and re-entered the house. As she was about to hang it up, her eyes rested on the price tag, still untouched. For some time she looked at the price; then she buried her face in the gingham folds. His pennies.

Mrs. Wayne carried the lamp slowly to her room. When ready to retire she knelt mechanically in prayer; but her mind wandered and she forgot to finish the weary psalm. Over and over she repeated his last words. "Don't worry, Ma, I'll be all right."

For some time the mother lay in bed with her eyes closed. Behind them she was tracing something that moved in her mind, like an invisible finger, leaving a trail of golden light . . . . It seemed to write, and erase as it wrote. She was growing calm. Her eyes felt better; she wasn't using them now. Somehow she saw now with deeper eyes, deep in the endless caverns of her mind. It was like feeling with eyes. Everything was all right, now. She felt much quieter.

She could not tell whether she had dozed, although she could have sworn that she had been wide awake.

In a piercing call, distant yet distinct, Mrs. Wayne heard her name.

She answered: "Is that you, son? Is that you?"

Only the stillness of the night, save for the crickets, answered. Half hysterical, she sprang from bed and called again over the banisters.

"Is that you, son? Is that you?"

The clock tolled eleven as Mrs. Wayne hurriedly dressed. Half clad, she rushed terror stricken from the house, down the road toward Marlowe's.

Passing Skinner's, she stopped suddenly. The house was dark, but Mrs. Wayne only thought of Sooky. She ran up the path toward the stoop, and rang the bell twice. Surely if they were camping Skippy would be there. Yes, she would know that he was all right.

The bell had been ringing steadily. Her hand flew back as if she had pricked it on the point of a sword. What would the Skinners think? She shrank back, ashamed.

A window over the porch opened. "Who's there?" called Mr. Skinner.

Perhaps if she clung to the shadows of the house she could glide away. What should she do? She wished that she had not awakened the family. How ridiculous she felt, now that they were up.

"Answer me! Who's there?" commanded Mr. Skinner.

Mrs. Wayne backed to the lawn. When she was in sight of Mr. Skinner leaning out of the window, she answered: "It's me, Mr. Skinner. Mrs. Wayne. I—or that is—I wanted to know—oh, I'm so sorry to bother you, but you know how it is—I was worried about my boy."

"Why, not at all, Mrs. Wayne. I thought Sooky was camping with Ray and Skippy. Wait! I'll ask Dolly."

He turned and called: "Dolly, did Skippy say anything about Sooky going camping with him?" After a pause, he leaned again over the sill. "Yes, he did, just as I thought. Mrs. Skinner is coming. Won't you come in? I'll be right down and open the door."

"Oh, please, don't bother. I just wanted to know—I forgot whether he said anything about camping or not—so I'll just go back, thank you—" She retreated backwards. She felt that her skirt was slipping. Oh, for a pin. She folded her arms over her waist to prevent the dreaded catastrophe. If she could only edge away.

"Good evening, Mrs. Wayne." Mrs. Skinner suddenly appeared beside her husband. She crossed her

arms over her chest and smiled: "You'll have to pardon my appearance, Mrs. Wayne. I'm sure Sooky is with my son, because Skippy said they were going camping. There's nothing to worry about, really. Skippy told us at lunch that they were to meet tonight."

"I'm so sorry that I woke you up, but I didn't realize it was so late . . . I—I was taking a walk and I—" Her skirt was slipping. She huddled herself in tightly. "Well . . . thank you so much. I'll go home now."

"Come in, Mrs. Wayne," invited Mrs. Skinner. "We just turned the lights out a minute ago. I'll—"

"No, please! I must go . . . . You see, I was just passing . . . I've got so much to do tonight . . . . I'm so sorry to bother you. Good night . . . . Thank you."

"George, you'd better walk home with Mrs. Wayne."

"Why, certainly, Mrs. Wayne. It won't take me a minute."

"No—I'm all right," replied Mrs. Wayne, and her hands trembled as she laced and interlaced them. The skirt was slipping constantly. She hugged her waist, and timidly stepped backwards: "Good night . . . . Thank you. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs. Wayne," answered the Skinners, closing the window.

Once she was out of sight, Mrs. Wayne searched for a pin, and heaved a sigh of relief when she was rewarded by a prick on the finger. She fixed her skirt.

Thoroughly weary, she trudged up the silent street toward her house. She stopped and pondered. Perhaps she had better go down to Marlowe's after all, just to satisfy herself that everything was all right.

She turned and walked back slowly, trying to make up her mind. Mrs. Skinner said they were camping. Skippy wasn't home. It wouldn't do to pass the Skinner's now. Perhaps they would see her. No, she would cross the street. In the middle of the road she paused. Oh, he was all right. She was just getting herself worked up. She started back. Still, it would give her peace of mind if she were only sure. Had Mrs. Skinner seen Sooky? Why hadn't she asked? But she must have seen him, or she wouldn't have known.

She found herself on the other side of the street, slowly walking toward Marlowe's. If she looked in on them, Skippy would tell his parents and they might be offended because she had not taken their word. She hesitated; she couldn't think. No, it wouldn't do to go down and perhaps scare them. She wouldn't offend the Skinners for the world. No, she would go on home

again. She felt weak. She must go back. People might think it funny if they saw her standing in the street at that hour.

She slowly retraced her steps toward home, and then stopped. She leaned against a fence. It was better to walk alongside the fence. Her nerves were completely gone, she felt. She groped her way slowly, dragging herself hand over hand along the pickets.

What was the matter with her? Here she had turned down the wrong street. This would never do. There was so much to do tomorrow. Mrs. Hopkins expected a fitting, too. She must get some sleep. Why didn't Sooky tell her that he was going camping? She thought of a price tag, and the stars blurred before her eyes. She wandered aimlessly. Her finger was moving instinctively over the pickets in unconscious imitation of Sooky rattling a stick.

She was home. She leaned heavily against the fence. In a moment she would scream. "Oh, dear Saviour, help me!" and her teeth bit the back of her trembling fist. No, she was all right now. Just tired; that was it . . . tired.

She dragged herself into the house and listlessly groped for a match. Oh, yes, the lamp was upstairs. She was too weary to get it now. She just wanted to sit down a minute. Her hat dragged. She dropped

the hat pin on the floor. She would pick it up in the morning. Yes, in the morning she would pick it up . . . . in the morning. . . .

She sank in the rocker, exhausted. Everything was silent in the darkened house. She swayed slowly. It creaked . . creaked . . . creaked . . . . creaked. . . . Mrs. Wayne nodded. Her drooping head was silhouetted against the window pane. Her hat rolled to the floor . . . the clock tolled one.

CHAPTER XXVI

THAT same night Skippy and Ray lay wide awake in the tent.

"What do ya suppose is keepin' Sooky?" asked Ray.

"Well, he told us he was comin', didn't he?"

"Yes, he told us he was comin', but look at the time!" Ray turned in the darkness, and Skippy felt the hot, trembling breath on his neck. "It's been hours since we been lyin' here waitin' . . . an' waitin'."

"Yeh . . . It's been hours," agreed Skippy.

"Only a little while ago the clock struck twelve."

"Yeh . . . I know."

"It seems so late—don't it?"

"Yeh . . . but he's liable to come any minute now."

"He was liabler to come before. It's so late now."

"I was wonderin'," began Skippy.

"What?"

"Wonderin' if me or you said somethin' that got him mad at us."

"Mad? What did I do to make him mad? Why, I never said nothin' in my whole life to make Sooky

mad." Ray paused. "I ain't never yet an' I never will. *No,* Sir! Never!"

"Ya didn't say nothin' about clothes? . . . You know—old clothes?"

"Who? Me?"

"Yes! You!"

"I ain't here to get took apart! An' I ain't to be took in by loud talkin', 'cause I seen you when you oncst give Sooky a dirty look."

"Who, *me*?"

"Yes, *you*!"

"When?"

"When? When you had that soapy hair comb an' Sooky said ya hair looked like a letter 'S' 'cause ya was in love with Carol Sharon."

"Oh, her!"

"Yeh. I guess other people what lives in tents can be took apart, I guess." Ray turned on his side and faced the wall.

"Ray?" Skippy nudged his companion. "Ray?"

"What?"

"Ya know . . . I'd give anything in this wide, wide world if Sooky was to come in now."

"Your sword? . . . ." Hearing no response, Ray raised his head and looked over his shoulder. "I say, your sword. . . ?"

"Yes, my *sword!*"

"Ya know, Skip?" Ray turned over and faced his friend. "Ya know, so would I—anything."

"He called at my house this mornin' an' wanted me to come out, an' when my mother come he got to winkin' at me. You know the way he does."

"Yeh."

"Well, that queered any chance I had of goin' with him, 'cause Mom got spicious right off. 'Are you sure you're just goin' blackberryin',' she sez, an' he just shows her the pail. Anyway, he gives me a wink an' sez, 'I'll see ya tonight.' An' with that off he goes an' I ain't seen him all day long."

"Was he goin' blackberryin'?"

"I didn't get a chance to ask him with Mom there."

"There's no more blackberryin' left in this place any more, unless he went in Krausmeyer's for them."

"Say! I just happened to think! He may of left a note in the hollow tree." Skippy sat up. "What'll ya bet?"

"I'll bet that's just what he did," said Ray. "Why didn't we think of that before?"

"I'll take a look," answered Skippy, crawling out of the tent.

"Did ya find anything?"

"Here's his pail—Oh, there's a note in it!"

"What does it say? Bring it in!" Ray struck a match and lit a candle.

"Here it is," said Skippy, entering the tent.

They both bent over it and read the pencil scrawls:

"See ya tonight fellers after super—cause Mom'll worry—Sooky."

"After supper!" They stared at each other in the flickering light. Skippy turned the paper.

"Nothin' on the back?" asked Ray.

"Nothin'."

"Do ya think he's home?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe he forgot."

"Sooky'd never leave a couple o' pals waitin' . . ." Skippy gulped, "an' waitin'."

"An' he wouldn't run away."

"Sooky leave his mother? They're just like tha-that!" For the first time Skippy's fingers failed to click.

The candlelight wavered in a sudden breeze, and, after a feeble flicker, went out. The friends were left in darkness. Skippy felt the warm body next to him. He gulped in silence.

"Ray?"

"Yeh—Skip."

"I—I was wonderin'."

"Wonderin' wh-what?"

"If we oughta go out an' look?"

"I'll go any place, but where would we look?"

"That's what I was wonderin'."

"Ya don't think—?"

"I'm just wonderin'."

"Where ya goin'?"

"Gettin' the pail."

"Are ya bringin' it in here?"

"Sure!"

"S-seems awful to keep it in here . . . don't it make ya feel terrible creepy, sorta—with . . . him . . . him . . . a-way?"

"I know . . . but it wouldn't be fair to a pal to leave his pail out . . . not . . . hi-his pail, Ray."

"Let's keep it in here, then—away in the corner."

Skippy felt the tremors of the body next to him as he sat with knees clasped. The crickets broke the utter stillness, except for the smothered, choking sighs of Ray. Motionless, Skippy waited until he felt the quivers of his friend taper off into sleep. Leaning over, he patted the sleeping figure, and then stretched out quietly for the pail.

With arms clasping an empty pail, Skippy sat staring into the darkness. In the distance, the town clock struck one. As the knell blended with space, a dog's mournful halloo threaded the tempo of the night.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE next day carpenters found Sooky in the cellar of the house upon which they were working. Throwing a coat over him, they carried him home. His teammates followed silently, dragging his home-made wagon still half filled with wood.

After the carpenters had returned to their work, the team stood in front of the house in awkward groups. For some time they stared at the closed shutters and exchanged frightened glances, huddled together; some screwed the buttonholes of their coats, while others grooved the toes of their shoes in the dirt. Skippy removed his hat to adjust his cowlick; as if by a given signal, the team followed his example. Hats in hand, they quietly stole away.

Unaware of the team's departure, Skippy continued the vigil alone. He now gazed numbly at the home as a veil of memories passed before his fixed eyes. Unconsciously he had grasped the fence and wedged his chin between the pickets. Somehow he felt that Sooky

would appear behind the open blinds of the kitchen window, wiping a dish. He glanced quickly in the direction of the porch, half expecting to see Sooky sneaking away, a grin on his face. Hearing whispering, he slowly turned and saw that people had gathered around him. He crept away to the fields opposite and stretched out in the grass.

He knew that somewhere behind those closed shutters mysterious things were happening. The minister was still in the house, he was sure; he had never taken his eyes from it, and he would surely have seen him leave. The thought helped him. He saw the neighbors creeping in and out on errands of kindness. It seemed that the whole town was doing something that had never been done for anybody before. Small children gathered before the house and conversed in signs and whispers, then silently ambled off on tiptoe. A sister stopped a little brother in the act of rattling the fence with a stick.

He discovered that he had been chewing grass. What time was it? He remembered that someone had been calling steadily. Perhaps his mother summoning him for lunch. Well, it must be well after noon time, he decided. He began to recall the sounds. He wondered where sounds went. What was that? Skippy heard it again—the distant howl of a dog. He had

kept that same sound up, all through the night. Sooky's friend. He could see Sooky now, scaling a cookie at the dog. Yes, Sooky wouldn't pass the dog without woofing for him. He listened to the animal's hallooing, and then, attracted by the sound of an opening door, he noticed that two men in black were standing on the porch opposite him. He crawled nearer to catch what they were saying.

When he looked up from his new position, he discovered that one of the men had just fastened long white ribbons underneath the bell. He could almost hear the faint flutter as ribbons and flowers gently swayed in the September air.

The other man was working on the outer door. His voice carried: "To do this thing right, we've got to have both doors open." The other man joined the one tugging at the door and helped pull; it rasped outward on squeaking hinges. "Guess it's never been opened before," said the second man.

The men re-entered the house and everything was still. Skippy looked at the opened vestibule and thoughts of Sooky whirled before him. Gone! No, that couldn't happen. No, sir, not to Sooky. He glanced at the ribbons and flowers. A crêpe! No, it wasn't a crêpe . . . it just wasn't! God was too nice for that. It was an angel! Yes, sir, one of God's

sentinels just waiting to show Sooky the way. See, the dog knew! Yes, he knew!

Were those cookies scalloped or just plain? He must remember to see that the dog got his cookies. Some day he'd fool the dog and sneak in a cruller.

He tried to shut out all thoughts of the party, but the more he tried the more vividly they returned. He recalled now how he had entered, holding the cake, and how Mrs. Wayne had gotten out a brand new table cloth and set the table. How happy she had been that night. She had cut red crêpe paper and put it over the lamp. Skippy thought of the cake. The words of Sooky came to him: "Here's a very real guest, Mom," he had said. "He don't horn in on a guy's party carryin' an aclair." And he had eyed the chocolate cake that had rested before him. "Say, Mom, we got three layers an' I don't see why we don't each grab a layer." He had pulled on her arm. "An' the top layer's for you, 'cause you're birthdayin'."

The sound of laughter startled Skippy. He looked up and saw that carpenters were going home, clanking their pails as they passed.

Skippy's toes ground into the grass; he buried his face in the clover. The nails dug into his fists as he beat the earth in prayer:

"Please, God, let Sooky see how we miss him so

much. Let him, will you, God, see?" The little body shook with tension. "Please, awfully, t-tell him I g-got his p-pail."

. . . . . .

The choir stood around the church in a listless group, waiting for the signal to depart. With hymnals clutched under their arms, they huddled together like frightened cattle in a storm. Skippy hoped that they would not have to wear raiment. He glanced nervously at the array of cottas and cassocks lined up on the hooks. He remembered seeing Sooky place his own there, and telling the choir that he never wanted his place disturbed; he had even tabbed it with a piece of chewing gum. Skippy watched Mr. Somme carefully fold the purple stole, and place it in the satchel in preparation for the services. A golden cross was embroidered on the purple silk. Skippy made a secret vow then and there that the chewing gum would now be as sacred to the church as a golden cross.

He heaved a sigh of relief when Mr. Somme informed them that Mrs. Wayne had expressed a wish that her boy's choir mates appear without vestments.

They arrived at the Wayne house in a silent file, and wormed their way through the motionless crowd of neighbors that lined the fence and filled the lawn and porch. The choir squeezed through the vestibule

and snuggled against a coat rack laden with myriads of hats. Somerset brought up the rear; as he edged through the door by a succession of shoves, someone in the choir jostled the coat rack, dislodging a derby that wabbled and rolled into the center of the parlor floor. Instantly every eye in the sea of expressionless faces that packed the parlor and dining room lit on the hat.

Skippy reddened as he entered and picked it up. A man craned his neck, saw his own initials, and scowled. A slight commotion in the hall jostled the rack again; all eyes swerved from Skippy as another derby rolled into the parlor. Another man colored as the heads bent in unison to study the features of a girl's photograph pasted in the crown.

Two men in long black coats and black gloves rescued the derby and removed the rack to the porch. Skippy watched them as they moved in and out stealthily, like phantoms from a dream world. Attracted by the overwhelming odor of flowers, he stole a terrified peek at the blinded windows banked with floral pieces. In a tremor he hurriedly turned his head toward the figures bolt upright.

They were all looking straight ahead. All the faces were strange to him at first and seemed like rows of orange balls; but, as he stared, he slowly recognized neighbors. The men looked as if they were bolstered

by collars that accentuated their faces, scrubbed to redness. Many of them he failed to recall; he put them down as relatives, and swallowed as he thought of those uncles and aunts who Sooky had said were always showering him with toys. He wanted to forget them as he strained his eyes on the bare floor, showing through the worn-out parlor carpet. A move among the audience caused him to look at a man selecting a toothpick from a case; the man wedged and pried his teeth while his eyes trailed the course of a fly.

Someone nodded to him, and on second glance he recognized Mrs. Barkenteen. He had never seen her dressed up before; in fact, he had never seen her out of her candy store. The truth was that Mrs. Barkenteen was confined to her store so much she looked upon this occasion as a social event. She sat in the front row so that she could peer straight up into the Minister's face during the services. Each new arrival, entering the hall, would be confronted by her stare; Mrs. Barkenteen would nod violently in return until her hat, balanced like a banana layer cake, swiveled around the knot of her tightly drawn hair.

Her eye became suddenly fixed on the blank tag of a floral piece. With a murmured "Excuse me," she walked over and turned it around until the handwriting showed prominently: "From Mrs. Barkenteen." She paused long enough to read the many cards on other

flowers, and as she stood Skippy could not help but notice her frayed skirt that sagged at the heels. The greenish black garment had been worn until it had the glow of burnished metal; her shoes bulged over on the sides and curled up at the toes where second leather showed. The little bouquet was tied with wide silk ribbon, and he wondered how many pennies worth of jelly beans she would have to sell to make it up.

As Mr. Somme entered and took his place, Mrs. Barkenteen turned to the silent figures in the rear and whispered "Sh!" Somebody sucked a tooth. With a quick glance Skippy saw Jim Lovering sink deeper into his chair.

The minister's voice sounded muffled as everybody crowded through the door. Skippy glinted at a tiny figure that wiggled to the moulding of the parlor door. It was Hecky, leaning forward open mouthed, with the greedy look of one who had slipped past a gatekeeper of a museum, intent upon devouring the wax works with a single glance.

Skippy felt smothered as a ponderous figure pushed him to the wall. His mouth was dry and blotted by the hot cheviot of a man's coat. Mr. Somme was reading. Perhaps from the psalms. He heard: ". . . 'Then Jesus called a little child unto him . . .'" Outdoors the vibrating air still protested with hammer beats; as the consoling tones of the minister stopped,

the world was suddenly still. A stifled cry from the upper landing pierced through the house. The organist was tapping for attention.

Ray whispered, "Hymn 679."

"Oh, yes . . . Hymn 679." Skippy wriggled away from the wall; they were already singing:

"There is a blessed home, beyond this land of woe,
Where trials never come, nor tears of sorrow flow;—"

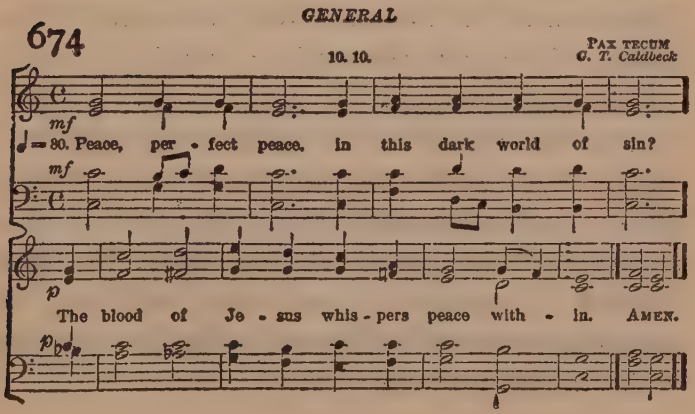
Again came that smothered cry from above, and the page of his hymnal blurred. He listened as the choir sang the second verse. They weren't pulling. Why didn't Ray get into it? Where was Barrelhead? Here was a team that wasn't pulling. It was the last chance for Sooky. "Come on, sing!" He was pushing, nudging: "C'mon, sing for Sook, fellers, sing!"

When the voices ceased, it seemed like the sudden stopping of a ticking clock. Not a move broke the stillness of the house, save the bark of a dog far away, and the faint rustle of a leaf in a flower piece.

Any minute Skippy would get the signal to advance to the centre of that motionless crowd and sing the solo. His finger held the place in the book. He looked at Mrs. Barkenteen, now staring at her tag with red, unseeing eyes. The man had ceased to wiggle his tooth pick, but held it rigid in clenched teeth. He

blew his nose. Convulsive sniffles swept through the parlor like a sputtering fuse.

Skippy's eyes were dimming the face of the minister, and he swallowed underneath his clenched teeth. He blinked hard to catch the signal. . . . He must pull himself together, now, because everything depended upon him. He was the leader, and there wasn't a boy in the group who did not lean on him to the very last. Men didn't cry . . . those were women. He stood with legs wide apart and his toes fairly sucked at the soles of his shoes, while his hand crushed the finger that held the place. He was fighting with all his strength. For Sooky's sake. The minister nodded, and Skippy stepped out from the choir into the center. A lull; then in a clear soprano he sang:



2 Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

3 Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?
On Jesus' bosom naught but calm is found.

4 Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.

5 Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.

6 Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?
Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.

7 It is enough: earth's struggles soon shall cease,
And Jesus call us to heaven's perfect peace.

EDWARD H. BICKERSTETH, 1875.

He knew the first three verses by heart, and glanced away from the long satin box half hidden by flowers. He was about to sing the fourth verse when he discovered that he had been holding his book upside down. "It's enough," he thought. Why, that was the begining of the last verse: "It is enough . . ." and Skippy sang to the end.

Suspense filled the air of the parlor and dining room; in the hall and on the porch people remained motionless, like the captured pawns of chess. Somewhere in the moulding, a mouse scampered into silence. The stairs creaked . . . creaked . . . and every head bent in prayer as the man in black passed haltingly to the front of the parlor, leading a mother.

"Barrelhead says we don't get ten cents for this singin' 'cause—" began Somerset.

"Beetle!" answered Skippy, stepping on his foot.

The choir was allowed to pass around and take a last look at their friend before filing out. Before he knew it, Skippy's eyes beheld a blurred picture of a brand new serge suit and a white tie; then he was ushered away by the man with the long black coat. The floral wreath marked "From the Choir" was placed in his hands. He heard the man say: "Carry this and follow the pallbearers to the church."

Outside the house the throng moved aside, and bowed in silence as the procession slowly moved toward the Parish. The bell was tolling. An overhanging elm swayed in the September breeze, and golden leaves fluttered to the ground. Through the open doors, candles flickered from the altar; the peals of the organ, floating through the church, announced the journey's end.

A man relieved Skippy of the wreath and he stood watching until the procession disappeared in the church. His feet dragged, and he sank wearily onto the curbstone, alone, listening to the tremors of the organ.

He raised his head as the sound of beating hammers came from the distance. The thrumming grew until it crashed on every side. He slowly rose and his body

stiffened as the volume increased in fury. Skippy's eyes flashed in hatred; the pounding raged in his ears, and instinctively he raised his arm. With clenched fist he began to beat in unison.

"It was all *your* fault! *You* did it! *You* did! *Damn* ya! *Damn* ya!" He drove before the slashing storm, breaking in his face, but his arm sagged: ". . . d-damn ya! . . . damn . . . pl-please stop . . . damn ya . . . w-won't ya . . . won't ya. . . ."

With tears streaming down his cheeks Skippy drooped to the curb, broken, defeated, swaying helplessly before the relentless beat.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Two weeks had passed and Hecky stopped Skippy for about the eightieth time since the funeral.

"I don't suppose, now, ya heard anything about my uneeform—did ya, I don't suppose?" he inquired.

"Didn't I tell ya a thousand times that I ain't goin' to ask Mrs. Wayne for it? No, sir! Not much!"

"But I'm the only guy on the team without one, 'n' besides she's goin' to move away 'n' live with her sister."

"Then you'll have to play without one. She's got trouble enough without us botherin' her about a uneeform," cautioned Skippy.

"It wouldn't be no trouble for me to ask her," argued Hecky. "That's it! I'll ask her."

"You do, 'n ya'll get a sock in the nose!"

"What hurt can it be? What hurt? In a nice way I'd ask it. I know she'll give it up."

"Ya mustn't be bringin' up sad memories! I'll let ya wear mine once in a while, but forget about Mrs. Wayne."

"Not the way I'd ask, it wouldn't be bringin' up sad memories. I'd just say off hand: 'Well, I guess you won't be needin' that uneeform any more, Mrs. Wayne, because—' "

"Ya will like fun! You—you—" Skippy choked.

"After maybe, huh, d' ya think?" said Hecky, stepping backward.

"After nothin'!" warned Skippy, eyes gleaming.

"Well, suppose I should happen to run into Mrs. Wayne 'n' by some chance the uneeform comes up in the conversation, huh?" asked Hecky, as he walked away. Turning the corner, he shouted, "It'd be awful if she took it away, but I'll—I'll—see you after."

Before Skippy could find an appropriate answer he had disappeared. Skippy stood pondering; his lower lip protruded. "Oh, why did I ever let a toad like him on the team!" he sighed. He gazed in the direction of the Wayne house, and his jaw tightened. "I won't let him! That's all—I won't let him!"

Running at top speed toward the widow's house, he bounded across the lawn and took the porch two steps at a time. He stopped abruptly before Mrs. Wayne, who was slowly rocking. She glanced up in alarm at his strange behavior; noticing the hair wet with perspiration, she inquired: "Why Skippy, what's happened!"

"Mrs. Wayne, I—I've come to protect you!"

"Protect me! From what?"

"From that guy Hecky!" Noting her puzzled look, he went on, "He's going to come here and annoy you about that baseball uneeform you got. You know —Sook's. So I thought I'd come here and protect you. The little toad! Just as if you didn't have troubles enough."

"Why, I intended to give back that uniform, Skippy. Suppose I wrap it up now and—"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Wayne! I didn't come for that. We don't want it, honest. Look! He's comin' now! Can I hide inside? Don't say I'm here—promise?"

"All right, I promise."

Skippy crouched behind the closed half door in the vestibule and waited. Hecky approached, whistling. Seeing Mrs. Wayne on the porch, he edged to the fence and ran a forefinger along the pickets. When he was directly opposite the house, he stopped.

"Well, Mrs. Wayne, it's certainly very lovely weather," he called.

"Yes, it is."

"Yes, it is. Well! Well!" Hecky advanced to the stoop.

Skippy felt his breath in heart beats, and dug his nails into the palms. Hecky brought up the subject

tactfully: "And such elegant weather for baseball. I only wish I had a uneef——"

"You rinsed-out toad, you!" burst Skippy, dashing out of the vestibule. The surprised Hecky could only gape in astonishment: "I said I'd give you a sock in the nose," he threatened, "'n' now ya come for it!"

"Boys! Boys! Skippy, please!" begged Mrs. Wayne.

Skippy hung his head ashamed, and tried to pry a board loose with his toe.

"Now, boys!" he heard her say. "I'm going to get that uniform. Promise me you won't fight."

"Yes'm, no'm, yes'm!" Skippy mumbled.

When assured that they were alone, Skippy mocked: "Maggot! Hairless little caterpillar! Beetle!"

Hecky only watched the open door. When Mrs. Wayne returned, he immediately relieved her of the priceless suit. "Oh, ain't that nice! And it's mine!"

"Belongs to us Honeydales, if anybody should happen to ask ya!" corrected Skippy.

"After, maybe, but—"

Before he could finish Skippy had him by the arm, and dragged him away, pinching Hecky like a vise as he turned to thank Mrs. Wayne again and again. When they had turned the corner, Hecky squirmed loose, and halted to take inventory of the pieces.

"Here's the shirt . . . 'n' here's the pants . . . 'n' here's the stockings . . . 'n' here's the belt . . . 'n' here's . . ." He went through them again, and nervously surveyed the ground with saucered eyes. "She forgot my hat! I'll have to go back 'n' get—"

As he turned, Skippy pounced on him with the spring of a cat. He bore him backwards, scattering the uniform to the winds. With all the strength of his body he held him pinned to the ground, while his fist pressed the flattened nose of Hecky. Astraddle his chest, he commanded: "Ya ain't goin' back! D' ya hear? Ya ain't goin' back! Say nuff!"

"Nu'! Nu'!"

With a final bounce, Skippy arose from his chest and helped him gather up the uniform. After brushing it off they continued walking. Hecky took the lead, increasing the distance at every step. He glanced cautiously over his shoulder: "After, maybe—" and then broke desperately into a sprint.

Down the street Skippy spurted after him. Pressing him closely, Skippy followed the fleeting Hecky as he scurried for home. He was arrested by the sound of Ray's voice: "Watch!"

Ray put down a loaf of bread, and snatched the bruised potato from the top of his oil can. Winding up, he hurled it after the speeding Hecky; it sailed

in an arc and landed with a squash on the fugitive's head.

"Now, who's the pitcher?" asked Ray, gleefully.

Skippy walked over: "Gee, that was some shot, Ray. What'll yer mother say about chucking a potato away?"

"Oh, I can easily charge another one at Krausmeyer's, and they won't know the difference."

"He thinks he's goin' to play on the Honeydales next year, but he doesn't know what Mr. Prince told us."

"We should worry about those buildings goin' up in Honeydale. You mustn't forget we've always got the orchard."

"You bet yuh!" said Skippy.

"An' if we can't have the orchard we can have the big field, 'cause then we wouldn't be breakin' any windows," said Ray.

"Gee, it looks as if it's the only place left for us, 'cause everything's built up right an' left. Ya know," Skippy paused, "Mr. Prince don't seem so glad to see us like he used to was."

"What'd he say?" asked Ray.

"Well, he ain't said nothin', but every time I talk to him about schedules he says, 'Some other time, Skippy. I'm up to my neck in work today.' I says, 'Do you think we could have a baseball diamond for next

year, Mr. Prince?' 'A year's a long time,' he says. 'Maybe this'll all be built up by then. Of course I don't want you boys breakin' in windows.' "

"Did ya show him the new pome you wrote?"

"Yeh." I says, " 'Here's our new Honeydale Call, Mr. Prince; what do ya think of it?' and I yells: 'America, America, Pep! Pep! Pep! Have we got it? Yep! Yep! Yep!' "

"What did he think of it?" asked Ray.

"He just looks up an' says, 'Ah, another Shelley in our midst.' "

"Who's Shelley?" asked Ray.

"Can't be much," answered Skippy. "He ain't none o' the Big Leaguers."

"What else did he say?' asked Ray.

" 'There, there now run along,' he says, an' I goes about ten feet an' then he calls out the door, 'I want to see you tomorrow after school.' "

"I wonder what he wants to see ya about," asked Ray. "Wouldn't it be great if he asked us to get up a football team!"

"Yeh, but if he did who'd we get?"

"We only got six o' the old team left," informed Ray, "an' ya gotta have 'leven men on a football team."

"Five men," corrected Skippy. "Ya mustn't forget that Barrelhead's leavin' for Military School soon."

"Oh, yeh, I forgot. Then we'll have to get some o' them new guys around," suggested Ray.

"On our team? Not much!"

"Oh, you'd have to," insisted Ray. "There isn't enough o' the old crowd."

"Gee, I wish things was like they used to was. These new kids is always tellin' dirty stories. I don't like them!"

"I'd give anything to know what Mr. Prince wants to see ya about," said Ray.

"Well, I'll tell ya what I'll do," answered Skippy. "Have the team in the orchard tomorrow afternoon at four o'clock an' I'll let ya know all about it."

"Well, I've gotta be trottin' this stuff home," and Ray picked up the oil can and loaf of bread. "S'long, Skip."

"Last look," called Skippy; and as he strolled down the sidewalk he knew Ray was walking backwards, yearning for a farewell look.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WELL, fellows," greeted Skippy, as he entered the orchard, "I just been to see Mr. Prince, an' he told me to tell the team not to go down 'round the Honeydale Estates any more. He says it won't look nice for us to be runnin' around, yellin'."

"When did we ever yell?" inquired Ray.

"I told him we'd be very quiet 'n' everythin'," continued Skippy, "but he says, no, we don't belong to Honeydale an' it'd be better if we kept in our own neighborhood. Besides, he says it's almost all sold out an' houses are goin' to be built in the whole section."

"In the very whole section?" asked one of the team.

"Yes, sir," said Skippy. "In the very whole section. There ain't even one place left in all Honeydale for us to have a baseball diamond."

"What about the uneeforms? Must we oughtta return them?" asked Somerset Gohagen.

"No, Mr. Prince says we can have the uneeforms, providin' we don't play ball in the streets when Honeydale is built up."

"Where *can* we play?"

"I asked my father that last night," informed Ray, "and he says we can have the field back of the house."

"Gee, that'll be great!" said Skippy, "but we can't call ourselves the Honeydales. We've gotta go back to the Oriole A.C."

"A.C.—Athletic Club," prompted Hecky.

"I forgot to say," said Ray, "that my father says that we shouldn't always play around the field, 'cause he doesn't want a lot o' shoutin'."

"There's no place else to play in Morrisville," said Freddie Hopkins, "unless we play in the streets. An' I know we can't do that, 'cause my uncle says we're goin' to have cops out here pretty soon. We'll get arrested if we start hittin' a baseball around."

"Yuh know what else I heard," announced Skippy. "My father says we're goin' to have paved streets in Morrisville now. So we c'n go roller-skatin', even if we can't play baseball any more."

"I got bigger news than that," said Freddie Hopkins. "My uncle just sold his house, an' he got three times more'n he thought he'd get. An' no sooner sold it than he found out that the whole row o' houses is goin' to be tore down."

"What!" they exclaimed in chorus. "That whole row of eight houses! Tore down!"

"Yes, sir, tore down!" insisted Freddie.

"Oh, then we'll have lots o' room to play ball," said Somerset Gohagen.

"No, ya can't, neither," continued Freddie, " 'cause they're goin' to build a row o' brick houses, four stories high."

"Four stories high!" exclaimed Skippy. "Why, that'll be a story higher'n the Telephone Building."

"Gee, it's getting to be a regular city. An' that ain't all," said Freddie, " 'cause my uncle's a lawyer an' he knows. They're goin' to be all stores underneath."

"What kinda stores?" they asked.

"They's goin' to be a butcher, an' a furniture store, an' a hardware store, an' a undertaker."

"What are ya givin' us?" said Skippy. "How do yuh know what kinda stores they're goin' to be there?"

"My uncle's a lawyer, ain't he?" questioned Freddie, annoyed by the heckling. "I guess I oughtta know, 'cause these men came in to see my uncle about leases, an' they told him what kinda stores they was goin' to have."

"Gee," said Skippy. "I only hope Krausmeyer'll be the undertaker's first customer."

"Here comes Barrelhead," announced Somerset Gohagen.

" 'Lo, Barrelhead."

"What's doin'?" asked Barrelhead.

"Oh, nothin'," said Skippy, kicking a tuft of grass with his toe. "We just ain't wanted any more down in Honeydale, an' there's no place to play ball any more."

"Well, that won't hurt me," answered Barrelhead, "'cause I'll be leaving for Military School next week. Oh boy! I saw the uniform I'm going to have. Gee, ya oughtta see it! It's all blue, and the pants have wide stripes down 'em. An' I have brass cross-guns on my collar, an' brass buttons all the way down my coat. An' think of it, I'm goin' to live with hundreds of fellows!"

"Won't you come back?" asked Ray.

"Only on vacations," said Barrelhead.

"Even if we don't have a place to play," said Skippy, "the gang oughtta always have a get-together."

"Yuh betcha!" they chorused.

"Each one of us could chip in," said Skippy, "an we'd have a banquet or somethin'. There'll only be five of us left now, an' we oughta stick together, fellers, 'cause I don't like the way this new crowd's comin' in and runnin' things around this town."

"There'll be six of us," said Barrelhead, "'cause if any trouble starts, I'll come down, fellers, and maybe I'll bring a couple o' cadets with me. Then let anybody get funny with us. We'll be armed with six-shooters an' everything."

"What do yuh say we have a little game of 'two o' cat,'" announced Ray.

"All right, let's go," came the hearty response.

"Where ya goin', Skippy?" inquired Ray. "Ain't ya goin' to play?"

"No," answered Skippy, "I think I'll go over an' chew the fat with Jim for a little while." And he walked through the orchard alone.

CHAPTER XXX

SKIPPY sat in the classroom, lazily turning over the pages of his geography. He passed over a picture of trees; instinctively he gazed out the window, but now a row of houses jutted against the sky like the teeth of a rusty saw.

His eyes swept over the class, and he surveyed the new faces all around him. Pasquale Maraccini was sticking out his tongue at Sadie Lefkowitz; evidently annoyed at her marked indifference, he began to prepare a paper wad for the rubber band that looped his finger. Skippy trembled at the thought of writing such a name five hundred times. Then he recalled the day that Miss Larkin made him write his name seven hundred times because he had handed in a paper with four hundred and ninety-nine ditto marks under his signature. He wondered if Miss Larkin preferred being married to teaching, and musing dreamily, he tried to imagine how her children would look. Suppose they had harelips, would people laugh if they sang in church? He glanced at the clock. Twelve minutes

of three. He must outline Europe in his mind. It was easy for the foreigners in the class to do that; they knew what it was like. They were almost all foreigners now. He wrinkled his nose. He wished the windows were open.

The door opened and Carol Sharon entered the class bearing a note for the teacher. He stared at her impersonally. How glad he was that they had never married. With a guilty frown, he recalled the damaging testimonial that he had written in her album:

> Many may wish you happiness
> While passing through this life;
> But none will ever love thee more
> Than one who calls thee wife.

Skippy started—she had glanced at him. Suppose she should hold him to his word, thinking it was a proposal? Well, if it came to the worst, he would marry her; but of course he would have to tell her that it would be loveless. Tears filled his eyes as he thought of spending fifty years together, all because he had written in her album. Naturally, they would have no children. Skippy felt that life had indeed been hard on him, because that had always been his dream—little children playing. He looked up appealingly, but Carol had turned to go. As she closed the door she

stuck up her nose straight at him. Skippy breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps, after all, it was better that Carol had skipped a grade. At least, if he ever skipped a class, Ray would naturally go with him, because they copied from each other; this was indeed fine friendship. His eyes returned to Ray's empty desk, and he wondered why Ray hadn't been to school. The teacher was writing on the blackboard; Skippy leaned back and stretched his arms upward. He yawningly noted it was eight minutes of three.

As he left the school he was joined by Somerset Gohagen: "Come on up to Krausmeyer's with me."

"Well, I was going to see Ray," said Skippy. "He ain't been to school all day."

"It won't take you a minute. It's on your way."

"All right," said Skippy, "but it takes you so long to get waited on. Always so many people in the store now."

"Oh, I don't have to get much," said Somerset.

"Say, what do yuh do, sleep in that baseball shirt?" asked Skippy. "Got the letters all wore off, ain't yuh? Open your coat."

"Oh, they come off," said Somerset.

"You might just as well take off the rest, 'cause it reads 'N. Y. State' now," suggested Skippy. "There's no sense to that."

"There's lots been took off this shirt. Lizzie used the whole tail for a bed quilt."

"What did she do that for?"

"She's going to marry a carpenter next month, an' I'm goin' to live with them."

"You mean he's goin' to live with you."

"No, he told Lizzie to sell the house an' we'd go away. Before we go Lizzie says she'll make a cake for the old team. She's goin' to have 'Farewell' wrote on it."

"There'll be nobody to eat it 'cept us an' Ray, an' Freddie Hopkins."

"What's the matter with Hecky?" asked Somerset.

"Oh—I don't know. He's all right, I guess, but I never see him."

"Do yuh ever hear from Barrelhead?" asked Somerset.

"No. Last time I saw him was when he was down Christmas. I only seen him for a little while, 'cause he had a couple o' cadets with him, an' he didn't have much time. I wrote to him an' spoke to him about the get-together we was goin' to have, but I ain't heard yet. Gee, I wish you wasn't goin' away, Somerset!"

"Oh, but I'll be back. You know me. I'm strong for a good old get-together. I'm going to come back every Saturday."

"It'd certainly be swell if we'd get all the old team together."

"Well, when we do, you know what?"

"Say," interrupted Skippy, "don't it look funny to see Mrs. Barkenteen's tore down?"

"You'd never even miss it," said Somerset, "now that the department store is added on."

"Oh, I dunno," said Skippy. "It used to be nice to drop in there after school for a cent's worth o' candy. She used to let you slide along the counters and rub your nose up against the case as long as you want. Ya know a feller's got to take time pickin' out candy. You're liable to go in wantin' jelly beans, an' ya see all them candies an' ya get mixed up. A feller can't make up his mind just like that!" Skippy turned to Somerset. "In these new stores—'What do yuh want?' they snap, an' before you know it, you buy somethin' you don't want. An' ya can't take it back, neither, like ya used to could with Mrs. Barkenteen."

"Before she moved away she come down an' said good-bye to Lizzie, an' ya oughta see her! She was all dressed up pretty like. Had brand new cherries on her hat an' everythin'. She told Lizzie she always said she wouldn't sell out unless she got what she wanted, an' they had to give in to her in the end, 'cause she held out for her own terms. An' they let her take the

horsehair rocker an' the coffin-picture she had. She was goin' to take the curtains, too, but the beads busted all over the floor. So she picked up enough for a necklace an' let it go at that."

"Yes," said Skippy, "Mrs. Barkenteen was always a very smart business woman. I never been able to get two cupfuls o' chicken corn for a cent yet. You said you was goin' in Krausmeyer's?"

"Oh, yes," said Somerset, "come on in."

"What are ya goin' to get?" asked Skippy.

"A can o' bakin' powder, 'cause it's Wednesday, an' the carpenter's comin' to see Lizzie tonight, an' she's goin'——"

"To bake a cake," concluded Skippy.

"Yeh," marveled Somerset. "How did ya know?"

"Oh, it come to me like that!" said Skippy, with a careless snap of his fingers.

They entered Krausmeyer's and edged their way toward the counter, through a crowd of customers. Two clerks bustled back and forth, and a boy stood piling orders into baskets. Krausmeyer had put a manager in charge of the store, and now the floor and shelves were neat and clean. Skippy gazed at the signs, posted in every direction. They were continually having "Sales." His eyes rested on one sign in particular: "Positively No Trust." Well, it was all

different now. These new people didn't seem to have much money. They weren't like the old customers. He glanced at Somerset worming his way toward the counter.

"Say, Somerset," he called suddenly. "I'm goin' to beat it. S'long!"

Skippy romped down the street on his way toward Marlowe's, heaving his books on the front steps as he passed his own house. As he entered the orchard he paused bewildered. Ray was carrying things from the barn to the house. Boxes . . . what on earth did he want with boxes?

"Hey, Ray! Yoo Hoo!"

Ray stopped, but only stared in silence. As Skippy drew nearer he answered: "'Lo, Skip."

"Why wasn't you at school today?" asked Skippy.

"'Cause."

"'Cause. 'Cause why?"

"'Cause," and Ray pointed to a heap of white stakes that had been piled in the orchard. "'Cause, that's why. We don't own the old place any more."

"Who says so, I'd like to know!" Skippy demanded.

"Krausmeyer," informed Ray. He drew Skippy's attention to a sign posted beside the mail-box: "Trespassing Forbidden Under Penalty of the Law. Prince & Krausmeyer, Owners."

Ray sat on a box and tugged at a tuft of grass with his feet. "It's that bill of ours what did it," he murmured. "Pop didn't have the money, an' we got to get out."

"Yuh mean you're goin' to move away?" asked Skippy.

"Yep, we have to, 'cause they're goin' to tear down the house an' put up a row o' stores."

"Gee, what'll I do without the old orchard?" asked Skippy. "It's the only place left to play in."

"Ya mustn't come in any more, Skip."

"Won't I never see you no more, Ray?"

"Oh, you know me," replied Ray. "I'll write every day."

"It's too bad we can't round up the gang for a good old get-together. Be nice to give you a little send-off, or somethin'."

"Gee, it'd be great, but I don't think we can, Skippy. Ya see, we was told to get out right away."

"You mean they told ya to get out—like that!"

"Yeh," Ray hung his head. "Just like that!"

"Ray, come!" his father called. Skippy looked up at Mr. Marlowe. He had his sleeves rolled up and he was sweeping rugs. Something flashed in the window, and he saw that Mrs. Marlowe was taking down the curtains. How bare it seemed to have just the win-

dows, no shades or anything. He felt Ray's hand on his arm.

"I gotta go now, Skippy, an' help Pop. If I don't see ya again, I'll have to bid youse Adios!" Ray held out his hand and Skippy took it. "Now don't forget!" he heard Ray saying: "I'll write every day, an' don't forget to let me know the doin's o' the gang. I'm goin' to come to that get-together, you betcha!"

"Ray!" called Mr. Marlowe again.

"Comin'! Comin'!" Ray hurried across the orchard; then he paused and turned, "Hey, Skip."

"Yeh, I know—'last look'," muttered Skippy to himself. "I ain't to be took in that easy."

"Skip!"

Skippy halted. He looked back slowly.

"Last look!" called Ray triumphantly; and he climbed the hill. He reached the top, and turned once. At the final flash of his friend's face, Skippy tried to call. Instead, he waved his arm silently. He trailed out of the orchard toward Jim Lovering's.

Jim was hanging up harness when he entered the barn. "'Lo, Jim," Skippy greeted in a listless voice. "Hear about Marlowes goin' to move?"

"I knew that a year ago," said Jim.

"Yuh know, Jim . . ." Skippy paused and tugged at a board with his toe. "Yuh know . . . sometimes

I feel this ain't the same town it used to was. All the gang's goin' away, an' everythin's all changed like."

"Do I know it!" Jim spit out of the window. "Do I know it! Would the Board of Health ha' given me notice about sanitary conditions? It's the big dairy companies . . . I know it! Oh, well, it's no use bucking a trust. I guess I know when I'm licked.

"They's givin' the five-hundred-dollar millionaires 'guaranteed' milk, 'cause they ain't used to real milk. Yuh gotta empty a sponge into the bottle before they'd think it's milk. Here I been deliverin' milk for twenty-two years, an' I ain't noticed no undertakers rushin' off the customers o' Jim Lovering . . . Board o' Health! . . . Guaranteed milk! . . . What the hell!"

Bess whinnied; Jim filled the bag with oats and rested it on the edge of the bin. For some time he toyed with the grain, letting it filter through his fingers. "An' besides, Bess ain't what she used to be." Though Jim spoke more to himself, he looked full at Bess; she turned her head in the stall and seemed to be taking part in the conversation. "That's what I get for not tradin' ya off before ya gets to carryin' on like a nanny goat. Anyway, a nanny goat's 'bout the only animal fit for this place, now. God! When I think of the empty cans out in front o' the houses, waitin' to be took off . . . I could croak!"

"That's nothin'," said Skippy. "You don't have to sit with a lot o' garlic all day like I do. Say Jim, did I tell yuh they're goin' to put us on half days till they get the big brick school built?"

"Nothin' but cans," continued Jim. "Everybody in cans! Everybody eatin' the same! God Almighty! What's the country comin' to? Where is they farms any more?"

Bess whinnied again, and Jim gave her the oats. "Oh well," he mused from within the stall, "I guess I've stopped here too long."

"Jim."

"Yeh?"

"Let's us both go 'way from here. We won't say nothin' to nobody about it. Just me an' you, an' I'll work for you an' it won't cost ya nothin'. No sir, nothin'!"

"If it warn't for Bess, I'd pick up tomorrow, son, an' never show up again," said Jim. And, seeing Bess twitch her ears, he added: "The ole carcass is the laughin' stock o' the milk trade, anyway!" Bess stamped her foot in repartee, because Jim stood on the wrong side of her good eye.

Skippy watched as Jim pitch-forked some hay into the stall. He listened to the sound of hammering

in the distance. "Say, Jim," he said, "they can't change the town any more, can they?"

Jim straightened up, and taking a plug of tobacco from his pocket zigzagged it between his teeth. He chopped the lump, and rolled it in his mouth reflectively: "No, Morrisville can't be changed any more. An', after all, maybe we oughtn't to be blamin' the trees when the roots ain't planted straight." Jim muttered to himself: ". . . right or wrong, my country!" And he spat in the manure.

"Gee, they're certainly slammin' up them houses in Honeydale! Who'd ever thought that all the Anderson Farm'd be built up like that!"

"Well, son," said Jim, "when that hammerin' first sounded in this town, I knowed it was goin' to grow an' grow until it swep' everythin' before it." He paused and listened to the faint incessant beat in the distance. "An' now we been through it, an' I guess it'll go on an' on . . . on to God knows where . . . on till they's not a inch o' farm land left in this country what ain't ever nothin' but right. . . . Well, take the flag. It's the kind of a banner a dollar-wavin' nation would have. The stars remind me of buzz saws and the stripes is lumber that'll never be replaced . . . ya know, son," sucking a tooth, "my father used to say:

'They's only one thing worse than a battle . . .'" He thrust his hands deep in his back pockets, and rocked quietly for a moment with legs spread apart, staring like a beaten chieftain in the wake of the dwindling tom-toms: "'an' that's a battlefield after it's all over.'"

"Ya know, Jim," said Skippy, "me and you has been friends a long time, an' if you ever move I don't know what I'll do. Say yuh won't, will yuh, Jim? Say it!"

The milkman stared long at his large open palm, and then looked at the pleading eyes through powerful fingers. "Son, I won't leave unless I have to, if that's what you mean." He ushered Skippy out of the door, and swung it shut behind them. As he mumbled over the lock, Bess answered with a stamp. Jim smiled at Skippy: "The damn fool thinks I'm puttin' through a tradin' deal. Whoa, ya old—Whoa, Bess, old girl!"

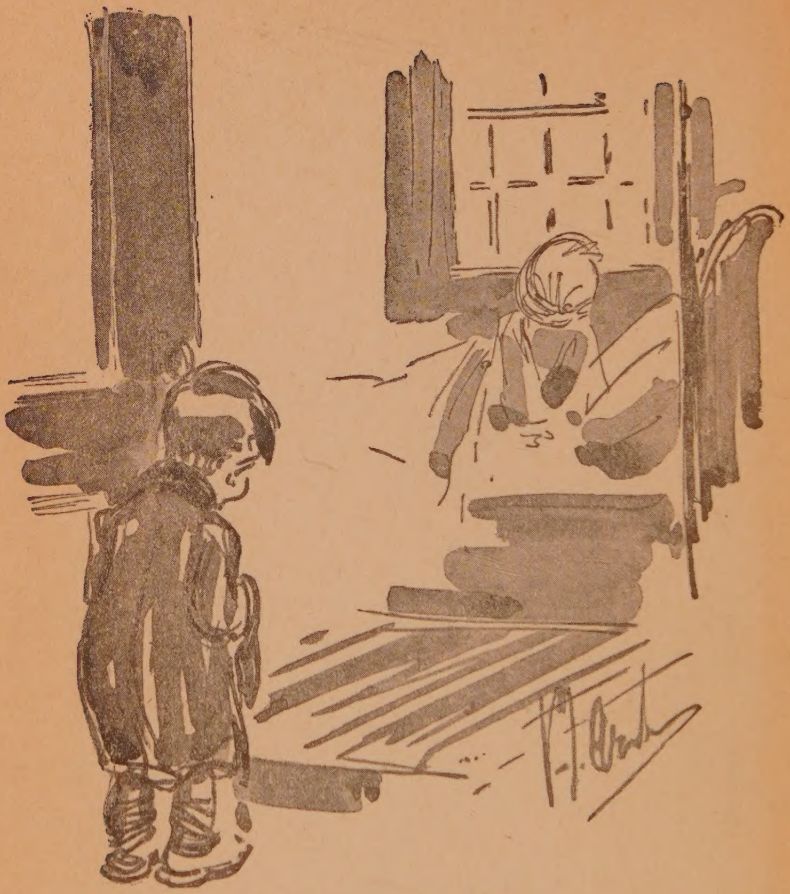
Jim ambled slowly toward the house; his eyes took in the little figure clinging by his side. As the two shadows merged into one he said: "Well, son, a feed bag's a feed bag."

"Yeh . . . s'long, Jim."

"S'long, Skippy." And Jim went in the house.

Skippy walked up Elm Street, kicking an empty condensed milk can. "Gee, the old gang busted up

just as we're goin' to get a gas house in the neighborhood." And then he added hopefully, "Well, we'll have to get a new bunch together, an' we'll call it 'The Gas House Gang.' An' of course I'll be the Captain."



"'Good morning! May I have a word with you, Mr. Skippy?' said Hecky briskly."

"Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin,
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within."